HEQC

Higher Education Quality Council

GRADUATE STANDARDS PROGRAMME

FINAL REPORT

VOLUME 2

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

GRADUATE
STANDARDS
PROGRAMME

FINAL REPORT

VOLUME 2
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

FOREWORD

This Final Report incorporates the main outcomes and recommendations from HEQC's Graduate Standards Programme (GSP). The results of the first phase were published in December 1995, and the draft of this report was circulated for comment to a wide number of interested parties both inside and outside the sector a year later; the draft report has also formed the basis of a very successful national conference.

The Report's main points are set out in the Executive Summary so I shall not repeat them here. Rather I should like to comment on one or two of the implications which are not only of considerable importance in their own right but which also have potentially great significance in the context of the imminent report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Committee).

The first issue is that of ownership. The GSP, like HEQC's other functions, and indeed HEQC itself, is founded on the principle of institutional responsibility for the assurance of quality and standards. Most of the Report's recommended actions are ones for individual institutions to take since they concern local practices in areas such as curriculum design, programme approval and student assessment. A number of the main recommendations, however, will require a concerted and disciplined approach by the entire higher education community if the underlying programme objectives of greater clarity, security and, in due course, comparability, are to be achieved. This will require a considerable effort throughout the sector.

This leads on to the second main issue, that of resources. As a body owned by the higher education institutions, HEQC is fully conscious of the enormous pressures universities and colleges are now under. In fact many of the Report's recommendations will not require huge cash expenditures, but they certainly imply some reallocation and reordering of activities. Precisely how this is done is a matter for institutions, but there can surely be no higher priority than the strengthening of our practices in this area, if only because if we do not do so, others will or may be tempted to do so on our behalf.

All this may mean that less resources are available for other external quality assurance processes, but again this may be a necessary consequence of the acceptance of the thrust of the Programme. It may well be the best use of those resources in any event. It is strongly arguable that if appropriately set standards are being achieved consistently, there is no need for the continuing intensive evaluation of the ways in which this is actually being done.

Throughout the Programme, HEQC has consulted and worked closely with institutions and others and this has helped both to secure our perceptions in reality and to win acceptance of our conclusions from the academic community. HEQC gratefully acknowledges the substantial and invaluable contributions made by institutions, subject-based and professional bodies, employers' and students' groups, and other organisations both in the UK and abroad. It would also wish to thank the representative bodies of the heads of higher education institutions, the Department for Education and Employment and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit for their support. The Council would particularly like to express its gratitude to the many individuals who have given freely of their time and advice, especially those who participated in the Programme's Steering Committee, the various advisory panels, expert groups, workshops and seminars. The scale of the contributions made – over a period when institutions have been under so many different demands – is a clear indication of the importance now accorded to this topic.

Finally, I would like to add my own thanks and congratulations to those colleagues in the Council's Quality Enhancement Group who have brought such a difficult subject to such a successful conclusion. Any comments on the report should be sent to the editor, Dr Peter Wright, Assistant Director, at HEQC's London office.

John Stoddart CBE
Chairman

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VOLUME 1 AND VOLUME 2

1.1 This document is the second volume of the final report of the Graduate Standards Programme (GSP). Many responses to the draft report commented that it was not presented clearly. For this reason it was decided that the final report should be split into two volumes. Volume 1 is relatively short and attempts to convey the rationale, methods, outcomes and next steps of the GSP as clearly and succinctly as possible. It is hoped that Volume 1 will be of interest to the non-specialist as well as to those within higher education. Volume 2 is devoted to a more detailed description of the GSP, aimed primarily at a specialist audience. A broad understanding of the GSP and what it has recommended can be obtained solely from Volume 1; Volume 2 provides greater detail for readers who wish to explore particular matters further.

1.2 Volume 2 begins with an account of changes that have taken place within higher education in the UK over recent years and their implications for academic standards. This information provides a context for the GSP.

2 THE CONTEXT OF THE GRADUATE STANDARDS DEBATE: A BACKGROUND ESSAY

2.1 Changes in the scale and nature of UK higher education

2.1.1 There has been **a steep rise in the number and diversity of higher education institutions.** When the Robbins report was published (1963), there were only 26 UK universities and (if initial teacher training and further education students are excluded) 118,000 students (around six per cent of the 18-21 age group). The vast majority of students – predominantly men except in the teacher training colleges – came more or less direct from school with either two or more GCE (General Certificate of Education) 'A'-level passes or at least three Scottish Highers, and were drawn from a relatively homogeneous, elite educational and social background. Today, with over 100 universities and more than 50 colleges of higher education (some of the latter with degree awarding powers), there are around 1.7 million higher education students. These include not only about 30 per cent of the 18-21 age group but also growing numbers of mature students, an increasing proportion of whom are part-time (DfEE, 1996a, HESA, 1996a). Between 1980 and 1990, overall numbers of students grew by 48 per cent, but numbers of full-time mature students increased by 69 per cent (NIACE, 1993). Half the total number of full-time and sandwich students (around half a million) are now aged over 21, and of these a substantial proportion are 25 or over, whilst nearly all of the half-million part-time enrolments are similarly mature (DfEE, 1996b). There has also been a rapid growth in continuing education, particularly of a vocational nature, and noticeably (from a low base) in the pre-1992 universities (Williams and Fry, 1994). Some 200,000 of all higher education students are accounted for by the growth of **collaborative provision** in further education colleges, and there has been a rapid growth of franchising of programmes to a variety of institutions in the UK and abroad.

2.1.2 The **entry profile of the student population** has also changed. Only 75 per cent of those entering full-time courses now do so on the basis of GCE 'A'-levels or Scottish Highers (UCAS, 1996); the remainder enter on the basis of vocational qualifications (now including General National Vocational Qualifications), Access Courses or by other 'non-standard' routes. The student body is now more representative of wider society, particularly in its gender balance, with a shift

from 42 per cent to 52 per cent female since 1980. This means that a significant proportion of the recent growth in higher education has been in the enrolment of women, a fact that seems markedly to influence such matters as subject choice and career expectation (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996).

2.1.3 Numerous shifts have taken place in the **nature and structure of programmes of study.** Degree courses have been developed in many subjects where they did not exist twenty years ago, especially various types of professional and vocational studies. These have been calculated to account for 56 per cent of all undergraduate work (Smithers and Robinson, 1995). Such programmes may involve work-based learning, credit accumulation and transfer and/or the accreditation of prior experiential learning. The rise of information technology (IT) has also affected the nature of learning. The increase in the volume and type of information now available to students through IT has provided a more flexible and dynamic learning environment. Despite economic pressures, employers generally view work placements as constituting an important part of higher education courses (though Purcell and Pitcher cast doubt on the rhetoric of some of this). Many work placements now lead to some form of accreditation and indeed, such experience may contribute to the final class of degree.

2.1.4 The biggest innovation has almost certainly been the rapid and near-universal adoption of **modular course structures**, some of which also involve reorganisation of the academic year on a two-semester basis. It is estimated that some 90 per cent of provision is now modularised or unitised in form (HEQC, 1996c). Structures vary from unitisation of single-honours courses, with relatively little change from traditional structures, to whole-institution modularisation allowing for the creation of a variety of pathways and implying considerable changes in assessment procedures, including a sharp reduction in dependence on end-of-programme assessment. Successive studies (eg, HEQC, 1996c, HEQC, 1996d) have found no evidence of pure 'pick and mix' schemes where students can build their own programmes regardless of coherence. However, modular schemes certainly offer new opportunities for (guided) creativity in the construction of study programmes. The traditional single-honours degree – still dominant today, but already under question at the time of the Robbins Report – may no longer offer an appropriate paradigm for the nature of most higher education students' experiences, even though most students apparently classify themselves as having studied a 'single discipline' (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). Only a small minority of students are admitted to programmes that are explicitly combined or interdisciplinary (UCAS, 1996). Such curricular developments raise a number of questions. These include the nature of assessment, the definition of standards across the range of disciplines that might be included within one student's programme, the skills that the student develops and demonstrates in navigating the scheme and the guidance and quality assurance mechanisms in place. Twenty years ago these questions would have been quite unfamiliar throughout higher education, and even a decade ago would probably have been the province of a minority of institutions.

2.2 Changes in the political and financial context of higher education

2.2.1 At the time of the Robbins and Anderson Reports in the early 1960s, the basis of Government commitment to higher education was relatively clear. Despite the implementation of expanded numbers recommended by Robbins, UK higher education remained essentially the preparation of an elite that would both benefit from and communicate to the rest of society those values that Robbins saw as the essence of higher education's mission: instruction in skills, development of general powers of the mind, advancement of learning, and transmission of a common culture. To this end, Government was willing to make substantial investments with few strings attached. Universities were well financed and, through the University Grants Committee (UGC), the arms-length relationship with Government was retained. The universities were given funding covering five years which they administered themselves. (The polytechnics and colleges sector was subject to more controls and was never as well financed, although its responsibilities, given the absence of a basic research mission, were arguably fewer.) Students too, following the Anderson recommendations, were provided with relatively generous maintenance grants.

2.2.2 These developments, between the 1960s and the 1980s, have been discussed elsewhere (notably in Shattock, 1994). By the late 1980s, higher education in the UK was beginning its most rapid period of expansion which would take it, within five years, from coverage of less than 20 per cent to more than 30 per cent of the 18-21 age group and turn it decisively from an 'elite' into a 'mass' system (Scott, 1995). The 1988 Education Reform Act made significant changes in the way the sector was funded, with separate funding councils for the universities and for the polytechnics and colleges. Although these councils distributed funds in different ways, the overall effect was to continue the reduction in levels of funding per student which had begun some years before. During the period of most rapid expansion, which had been fuelled by a Government decision to raise the per-student element of funding by higher fees, average unit costs fell rapidly. Many institutions began to recruit a number of additional 'fees-only' students at very low marginal costs. At the same time, the Government froze the student maintenance grant and introduced a loan system to supplement it.

2.2.3 The effect of these financial stringencies has been considerable. At institutional level, significant economies of scale have undoubtedly been possible, due to expanding numbers and some increase in the use of new technologies. However, there is much evidence of rising size of teaching groups, and also of increasing workloads for academic staff (for example, Court, 1996). However, the restriction on expansion of Government-funded students since 1994 has reduced the scope for further economies of scale. At the level of the individual student, there has been similar evidence of the growth of debt and hardship (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996), and of the need to take part-time employment during term-time as well as the traditional vacation jobs. This has probably diminished the ability of students to undertake sustained study of a traditional kind.

2.2.4 During this period, no formal attempt was made to reformulate a consensus of national understanding of the purposes of higher education on the lines of the Robbins Report. However, successive Government White Papers (DES, 1987, 1991) suggested a shift towards a more instrumental understanding of those purposes, with a stress on the production of graduates to meet the economy's need for highly qualified people. Successive reports by employer bodies (notably CBI, 1994, CIHE, 1995) have supported this priority; employers have called both for more graduates (40 per cent or eventually more of the target 18-21 year old population) and for graduates better equipped with the transferable personal skills that are believed to be needed in employment.

2.2.5 With this progressive reformulation of the purposes of higher education, and the increasing (though at unit level decreasing) amounts of taxpayers' money devoted to higher education, have come pressures for greater accountability. The polytechnics and colleges had always been subject to a degree of public control, through their ownership (in most cases) by local education authorities, through the activities of Her Majesty's Inspectorate and through the tutelage of the Council of National Academic Awards (CNAA) on degree standards. Most of these mechanisms had been somewhat relaxed during the later 1980s, not least by the institutions' final removal in 1988 from local authority ownership. However, they did not disappear entirely. The universities, apart from their teacher training function, had never been similarly constrained. Even the UGC, as Shattock demonstrates, had exercised the lightest overview of the details of university activities, and even this was on behalf of the sector corporately, rather than on behalf of the Government. Nevertheless, at the turn of the decade, the CVCP, mindful of pressures towards greater accountability, established the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) to oversee universities' own quality assurance arrangements. When the two sectors of higher education were unified in 1992, the newly formed HEQC took over aspects of the work of the disbanded AAU and, to some extent, that of the CNAA. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act had already made provision for the higher education funding councils to undertake the direct assessment of the quality of teaching and learning, partly, at least, in response to the perceived need to assure quality of provision at a time of increasing financial stringency and also to satisfy the Government's desire for demonstrable accountability.

2.2.6 This development in formal accountability to funding agencies was paralleled by a less formal approach to accountability to the wider community including, but not restricted to,

students. The Citizen's Charter, created at the beginning of the 1990s, was an attempt by the Government to introduce into the public services a greater orientation towards 'customers'. A number of 'charters' for particular public services were published and, in 1993, a *Charter for Higher Education* was produced which – after consultation with major higher education interests – set out in general terms the 'reasonable expectations' of students, employers and local communities. This was preceded by proposals on somewhat similar lines from the National Union of Students. The Government's Charter was followed by individual charters or similar documents in a number of higher education institutions. The funding councils' decisions to publish teaching quality assessment reports (and the HEQC's decision similarly to publish audit reports) were also a response to the pressure to make higher education more transparent to 'consumers'. In parallel with these externally encouraged moves to greater accountability and visibility, several higher education institutions investigated the possible use of other external bench-marks (such as the quality assurance standard BS 5750/ISO 9000, and the Investors in People award) to provide to their 'customers' an assurance, in non-academic terms (as distinct from the academic audit process), of the quality of their service.

2.2.7 These trends were by no means unique to higher education and reflect trends in society more generally (Scott, 1995). Public and private goods and services alike were exposed to such accountability pressure as a broad cultural phenomenon. However, the years of expansion meant that higher education now affected the lives of individuals and communities on a scale quite inconceivable at the time of the Robbins Report. The universities in 1994, themselves clearly responding to consumer awareness, noted that they had become massive players in local community life. In many towns and cities higher education is the largest employment sector and directly influences the quality of life in a variety of ways by, for instance, contributing to economic development through the education and training of local employees, applied research with local firms, and simply through the local spending power of its staff and students (CVCP, 1994). It is likely that the socio-economic importance of higher education has influenced the extent to which it has been subjected to the 'consumer culture'.

2.3 Changes elsewhere in the education and training system

2.3.1 Considerable changes have occurred over the past decade in the rest of the education and training system.

2.3.2 Within **schools** there has been the introduction of the National Curriculum – itself a response to concerns about academic standards – though its impact on higher education is likely to remain limited for some years as the reforms work their way through. That was preceded, however, by the introduction in 1988 of the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). There has been much debate about whether the rising trend of examination attainments at 16, certainly associated with GCSE (though pre-dating it), represents the maintenance of standards expected over time and improvement in student achievement. It is, however, indisputable that GCSE has been associated with a rapid rise (though again slightly pre-dated by it) in the proportion of young people staying on in full-time education beyond 16. From one of the lowest in the Western world (around 40 per cent in 1980), the percentage of students staying on beyond 16 began to increase in around 1985 and now, at more than 70 per cent, bears comparison with most competitor nations (DfEE, 1996a, 1996b). That in turn has been associated with a slightly slower, but still significant, increase in numbers attempting and attaining GCE 'A'-level. A substantial proportion of these increases is accounted for by the further education sector, which has grown rapidly, particularly since further education colleges achieved independent corporate status in 1992.

2.3.3 Alongside these developments in 'mainstream academic' provision there have been significant changes on the **vocational** front. The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established in 1986 to bring into being a comprehensive framework of competence-based vocational qualifications. This framework consisted of five levels embracing occupational competence from

routine to high level. In 1989 SCOTVEC (Scottish Vocational Education Council) took on similar responsibilities in Scotland. SCOTVEC, like NCVQ, was an accrediting body, but was an awarding body as well (see HEQC, 1995a for more information on vocational qualifications). The immediate impact of this has been a rationalisation of vocational qualifications at lower levels, including some which have historically provided an entry route to higher education, and are progressively being embraced within the new system of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). There are now three streams of qualifications – the academic, the general vocational, and the specific vocational – and, despite calls for further rationalisation, that structure seems broadly settled (Dearing, 1996). In principle, all these have different implications for the nature and levels of knowledge and skill that might be present in entrants to higher education, though there is little evidence as yet that the third route – occupationally specific National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – has had a significant effect, at least on conventional undergraduate provision. Only five per cent of students admitted through UCAS have 'other' qualifications which might include NVQs (UCAS, 1996) though the proportion may well be higher for part-time and post-experience provision.

2.3.4 Although the NVQ framework nominally extends up to level 5 (ED, 1995), which could impact on higher education, development in most areas (outside management) has been slow. The main effect so far has been an emphasis on the role of competence-based and criterion-referenced assessment (Jessup, 1991, Barnett, 1994, Wolf, 1995), that has affected parts of higher education, particularly those (mainly in post-experience vocational education) where credit frameworks seek to encompass NVQs (SEEC, 1996).

2.3.5 The rise of 'consumer culture' has led to the notion of the student as consumer. Accountability demands, changes in student funding and the pressures of competition on higher education institutions to produce good student results (plus a trend, mirrored in wider society, for institutions to have a responsibility for the emotional as well as the academic needs of their students) have generated a whole variety of student support services that were virtually non-existent a generation ago. Students now have access to financial advice, extensive on-campus health services, counselling and study guidance, as well as the more traditional careers service.

2.4 Changes in the demands made on higher education

2.4.1 The changes in the nature and scale of higher education have resulted in graduates playing a far larger and more diverse part in the labour market. This, combined with shifting Government philosophy and the rise of the 'consumer culture', has placed a premium on the enhancement of the 'employability' of graduates.

2.4.2 This is not a new preoccupation. The Robbins Report referred to the development of skills for employment as one of the purposes of higher education. It could be argued that all the other three purposes offered opportunities to develop ways in which graduates could be prepared to make their contribution to society and to the economy. The language of 'transferable skills' began to become current in the early 1980s, with the UGC and the CNAA both encouraging their inculcation. Roizen and Jepson (1985) published an early study of the extent to which higher education was seen by employers as effectively incorporating the attributes needed for employment in general. The encouragement of such attributes, from 1988, as a key aspect of the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) Initiative (funded by the then Department of Employment) was thus not a new departure for higher education. However, EHE appears to have had particular influence over the way in which many academics perceive questions about 'employability' qualities, and about their responsibility, along with employers', for developing those qualities in their students.

2.4.3 Although, as stated above, a substantial part of the increase in higher education numbers has been in professional and vocational areas (many of them new to higher education and needing to demonstrate that they could be studied to 'graduate standard'), the majority of graduates have not entered professions for which their degree has directly and specifically equipped them. Even those

in highly specific areas of study such as engineering frequently do not become engineers – and, if they do, may not remain practising engineers for very long. These facts have had greater impact because a degree has become the route to employment for a higher and higher proportion of the 18-21 age group. Such considerations may be less relevant to older students who may be motivated by extremely specific career aspirations. However, even for these students, preparation for a changing and largely unknown employment future has become increasingly important.

2.4.4 It was typically expected at the time of Robbins that graduates would either enter academe or work at a high intellectual level in the public service or in industry. For such posts, the development of what Robbins called 'general powers of the mind' would usually be as important as (and in many cases more important than) a grounding in a specific knowledge and skill base. This situation influenced the understandings of the 'standards' of degrees, often only implicit, both in and outside the academic world.

2.4.5 In a mass higher education system employment expectations may well be rather different. The proportion of graduates entering what might be called academic or quasi-academic occupations has diminished sharply, even though student aspirations still appear somewhat skewed towards such work (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). There is still much debate about whether there is such a thing as a 'graduate job' or perhaps rather a graduate way of doing a job, and whether employers have yet learnt to make use of whatever attributes graduates may bring. Mason (1995) suggests that various industrial and commercial sectors have responded in different ways. Many argue that, in a 'knowledge society', far more workers need the cognitive attributes that higher education has always promoted, and that higher education would be unwise to bend to short-term and instrumentalist employer expectations of the attributes or competences that a graduate ought to possess (Barnett, 1994). Others would argue that the instrumentalist language of 'core' or 'key' skills, and the language of ideal graduate attributes, are not as far apart as might at first appear, and that the advent of the knowledge society offers precisely an opportunity for reconciling the development of 'skills for employment' and of 'general powers of the mind'. What is clear is that there is a potential issue about matching the 'learning outcomes' (Otter, 1992) of study in higher education, that have been acquired with considerable public (or sometimes private) investment, with the needs of graduates as they embark on life and work after graduation. Moreover, that issue cannot ignore the radical changes in the graduate employment market, in which the greatest attribute required may increasingly be the tolerance and creative use of uncertainty and change (AGR, 1995).

2.4.6 Large employers, the traditional destination of graduates, have been particularly vocal in seeking in their recruits the attributes needed for employment – not intellectual rigour alone, but also communication, teamwork and other skills. However, another feature of change in the graduate labour market has been the rise in opportunities with small and medium employers and also in self-employment, as compared to the relative (but not absolute) reduction in large-employer opportunities (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). Here, the requirements may be *prima facie* different – not least because graduates in such positions cannot expect periods of systematic employer-sponsored induction and development, but are themselves responsible for bringing to the post the competences that are needed from the first day of employment. However, it may be argued (AGR, 1995) that such situations simply put a yet higher premium on those self-same attributes of good communication and interpersonal skills, adaptability and the ability to continue learning.

2.4.7 The most recent piece of major research in the area of graduates and employment (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997) argues that traditional subject-based higher education, while certainly equipping students with the 'general powers of the mind', is less successful in providing students with the general workplace skills required for any employee to 'fit in'. According to Harvey, Moon and Geall, higher education needs explicitly to integrate transferable skills into subject work (and assess these), while employers (especially large firms) must commit resources to offering increased numbers of work placements for students.

2.5 International dimensions

2.5.1 Since the Middle Ages, higher education has, to a greater or lesser extent, been an international as well as national enterprise. This has been highlighted in recent years by the growing number of overseas students and the UK's membership of the European Union (EU).

2.5.2 If EU students are excluded, some six per cent of all full-time and sandwich UK higher education students are from overseas (DfEE, 1996b). They are drawn from a wide and growing market, and earn revenue for providers and for the country. However, the market is becoming increasingly competitive. The benefit of the English language as a *lingua franca* is shared by higher education institutions in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in particular. Uncertainties have been expressed in some of the largest traditional markets (notably South-East Asia) about the effect of UK higher education expansion on quality and standards of provision. The Graduate Standards Programme was initiated in part to satisfy the desire of both the UK Government and higher education representative bodies to find an objective means of reassurance that standards (between institutions and over time) are sufficiently comparable. This would give overseas students and their sponsors confidence in the UK higher education system as a whole. It should be noted here that some competitor countries, notably Australia and New Zealand, have gone some distance down the road of expressing the standards of their qualifications – even up to degree level – in criterion-referenced, competence-based terms.

2.5.3 The EU is also a large and growing market and accounts for a further four per cent of enrolments (DfEE, 1996b). Again the English language is a powerful attraction for students to study in the UK, although by Community law, EU students cannot be charged higher fees than those prevailing for domestic students. Another powerful attraction of UK higher education is the perception that universities in many other EU countries, despite (or perhaps because of) their generally more open access policies to qualified young people, are suffering from overcrowding, falling completion rates, increase in the effective length of courses, and rigidities arising from bureaucratic control systems. The ERASMUS scheme (now an element within the EU's SOCRATES programme) has encouraged mobility between higher education institutions. It has exposed academics, as well as students, in the UK and in other countries to different ways of teaching and assessing. In the process, a general impression has emerged that academic standards in at least some EU countries, at certain stages of courses, are more rigorous than those in the UK (Teichler, 1990). Whilst this may in some cases reflect continued adherence to very traditional structures of curricula and assessment (modularisation and credit systems in the UK sense, for example, are relatively undeveloped in Continental Europe – HEQC, 1994b), it nevertheless gives cause for concern.

2.5.4 The EU, in support of its encouragement of student mobility, has undertaken comparative studies of quality assurance methodologies in member states. A few subject-specific studies of standards have also been undertaken, mainly in the fields of economics and engineering. Outcomes so far suggest the extreme difficulty of comparing the outcomes of radically different higher education systems. The concern over comparability remains.

2.5.5 The EU, in the context of policies on the mobility of labour, has also put in place Directives regarding the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Since a higher education qualification normally constitutes a key part of professional formation, this also directly affects higher education. Hitherto, the criteria for mutual recognition have often been heavily based on the **length** of the higher education experience, as a proxy for a common **standard**. That is already to the disadvantage of the UK where degree courses are usually shorter than elsewhere and often provide a smaller proportion of the overall professional formation process, as, for example, in engineering. Where comparability of standards is itself under question, the disadvantage may be compounded. In a few professional areas, where the substantive requirements for practice are reasonably common between member states, the EU is now studying the possibility of outcome-related criteria for recognition. There is also considerable interest in the EU and in some member states (and some partner states in Eastern Europe) in aspects of the NVQ system (NCVQ, 1996). An influential report (IRDAC, 1994) commended

to the EU's institutions, and to higher education institutions in member states, many of the same priorities – such as attention to graduate employability in a range of settings, transferable skills, and lifelong learning – that have been promoted through the changes identified above within the UK. Such priorities were also commended in a recent Commission White Paper on education and training (CEC, 1996).

2.6 Conclusion

2.6.1 Taken together, these developments suggest a fundamental shift in recent years within UK higher education and within its social context (see Schuller, 1995 for another account). Given these changes, and the growing heterogeneity of the students and of their learning experiences, it was to be expected that more attention would come to focus on what graduates achieve: on the outcomes of their programmes of study. The traditional assumption of tacit setting and maintenance of standards within an academic elite, accepted as such by an equally elite group of gatekeepers in the labour market and elsewhere, is no longer generally accepted. The Graduate Standards Programme, and the debates about outcomes and assessment which pre-date it (such as Otter, 1992; Atkins *et al*, 1993), thus constitute an important part of the process of redefinition of the nature and scope of higher education. These were taken up by the Committee of Inquiry chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, established by the then Government in 1996.

SECTION 2

THE FINDINGS OF THE GSP AS SET OUT IN THE DRAFT REPORT

(NOVEMBER 1996)

1 INTRODUCTION: HOW WAS THE GSP SET UP?

1.1 In the summer of 1994, HEQC was asked by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), with the support of the Standing Conference of Principals of Colleges of Higher Education (SCOP), to consider the development of threshold standards for undergraduate degrees (the full text of the CVCP's statement is attached as Annex A). The CVCP's action was a response to an invitation from the then Secretary of State for Education to higher education collectively and to HEQC, to give greater attention to 'broad comparability of standards'. As Section 1 indicates (see paragraphs 2.5), a concern with comparability was not limited to the UK, although it took a variety of forms in other countries.

2 THE PRINCIPLES THAT HAVE GOVERNED HEQC'S APPROACH TO ACADEMIC STANDARDS

2.1 Introduction

All the Council's work has been built on the principle that universities and colleges are responsible for the quality and standards of the education that they provide and the standards of the awards that they confer. Universities and colleges hold these responsibilities formally, as individual institutions, and, collectively, as members of an academic and professional community. The task of the Council, through its quality assurance and enhancement activities, has been to assist its member institutions, individually and collectively, in discharging these responsibilities.

2.2 Institutional responsibility

The standards of student attainment judged appropriate for the award of a particular qualification are the direct responsibility of those who design and validate programmes, teach and assess students, and award degrees. It is neither appropriate nor desirable for HEQC, CVCP, SCOP, the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (COSHEP) or any other national body to state what the standards of degrees or other awards should be in terms of curriculum content or assessment criteria. That is the responsibility of individual institutions, both legally and as a matter of practice, using subject and professional networks and similar organisations as reference points.

2.3 Diversity

Individual institutional responsibility for their own programmes and awards has led to great diversity of provision, reflecting in turn the multifarious nature of student interests and needs in higher education as it now exists. Diversity is also strongly supported as a means of increasing national economic competitiveness. The question of whether there should be any limits to this is a matter on which the sector must decide.

2.4 Collective responsibility

While institutional responsibility is acknowledged, the 1995 CVCP residential conference confirmed that this was a responsibility which institutions share, collectively, as an academic and professional community. The recommendations set out in this report are all based on the assumption that the sector, through its representative bodies and agencies, rather than the Government or any of its agencies, is responsible for securing whatever collective agreement and action is needed to inform and underpin institutional policies and practices.

2.5 Enhancement and accountability

It is also assumed that the key to comparability, clarification and improvement of standards is through the enhancement of academic practice in institutions rather than through the establishment of 'appropriate' standards by a central standards or funding agency which establishes norms and bench-marks by external accountability processes. Development activity at institutional level would be supported as necessary, appropriate and feasible, by instruments and tools developed by HEQC/QAAHE, in partnership with institutions.

2.6 Burden of accountability

It is strongly arguable that the present intensity of external arrangements for assuring the quality of programmes reflects in part the relative lack of clear institutional bench-marks. If greater transparency can be achieved in the ways in which institutions set, maintain and review the standards associated with their awards, the need for the present level of external quality scrutiny should considerably diminish. The sector may need to consider a reallocation of resources for this important task.

2.7 The Graduate Standards Programme was conducted on the basis of these principles. The investigative work was undertaken in collaboration with, and on behalf of, higher education collectively. Many individuals, groups and institutions throughout the United Kingdom have made invaluable contributions to the programme and its findings. Wherever possible, investigative and developmental work were designed to identify and build upon existing activities so as to enhance and disseminate good practice and sharpen approaches to quality assurance. Indeed, several of the investigations were initiated by individual institutions, groups of institutions, subject associations (SAs) or professional and statutory bodies (PSBs) that sought to collaborate with HEQC and that approached HEQC's Quality Enhancement Group (QEG) for advice and support. (The various components of this work are described in Annex B.)

2.8 The GSP also sought the views of those who sponsor and benefit from higher education, including students, employers, professional and statutory bodies, and government agencies. Their interests and perspectives have helped to shape the proposed lines of action. In addition, developments in quality assurance taking place in other countries and in relation to international links have offered important points of reference. Council staff presented the work of the GSP to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Review of Tertiary Education in seven countries. The response of the international review team suggested that the issues faced by the UK were shared by other industrialised nations, and that the outcomes of the GSP would prove of value to others.

2.9 In recent years, public interest in the standards of higher education has increased greatly. This has also been the case in relation to standards in other sectors of education and elsewhere. This rising interest has taken place during a time of very rapid change in higher education (as Section 1 suggests) and may, in part, be explained by it. The need to understand the magnitude and consequences of this change has strongly influenced the methods adopted by the Graduate Standards Programme, as well as the wider work conducted by the QEG – it is central to an understanding of the Council's findings and recommendations. The GSP surveys, reports and consultative papers, seminars, workshops, conferences and presentations were planned to assist individuals and institutions to respond to the challenges that are posed by these changes. Their purpose has been to develop an appreciation of the range of present practice; to provide an analysis of, and commentary on, the impact and potential consequences of change for current approaches to defining, securing and comparing academic standards; and to shape proposals that would strengthen higher education for the future.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 The area of standards in higher education is complex, sensitive and important both for universities and colleges collectively and for the UK as a whole. Because of this, the GSP has sought to employ methods selected to meet two criteria: to provide findings that had been triangulated from different sources of evidence; and to be capable of distinguishing between the practice, perceptions and politics of academic standards.

3.2 The main focus for the work has been the specific remit given to HEQC by CVCP. However, other survey and developmental work, for example, on institutional self-evaluation, internal audit, departmental management, the development of guidelines and the analysis of audit and assessment reports have helped in the construction of a broad overview of academic standards and their comparability in an expanded and diversified system.

3.3 The GSP combined investigation, consultation and development, and thus a variety of activities have been used. These have included:

- documentary analysis and literature searches;
- surveys of current practice;
- research commissioned from external consultants;
- consultations (face-to-face and written);
- focused seminars and workshops;
- 'trigger' papers and presentations to promote debate;
- statistical analyses;
- co-ordinated development work in specific areas.

(For further details see Annex B.)

4 THE FIRST STAGE OF THE GRADUATE STANDARDS PROGRAMME

4.1 HEQC's response to the CVCP's request was a threefold strategy:

- to focus more sharply on academic standards within the audit process by inviting institutions to indicate whether or not they had a corporate policy in respect of standards and, if so, to indicate how that policy was implemented, how its effectiveness was monitored, and the extent to which it was informed by measures to ensure comparability of standards with other institutions;
- to investigate and consult on strengthening external examining;
- to investigate and consult on the desirability and feasibility of developing threshold standards for first degrees.

4.2 The definition of academic standards that was adopted by HEQC – after consultation in 1994 with its member institutions – was:

> *explicit levels of academic attainment that are used to describe and measure academic requirements and achievements of individual students and groups of students.*

4.3 This definition concentrates particularly on standards of attainment. It was chosen because it was judged to capture the academic requirements that are embodied in – and exemplified through – the assessment of students' performance within programmes of study. Standards of intended and actual attainment are also of vital concern to higher education's constituencies. What is more, they are the basis for determining the choice of methods of teaching and learning; and provide a reference point from which to evaluate the quality of the education provided and experienced.

4.4 The work of the GSP, however, casts doubt on the applicability – at present – of this definition

to all UK higher education. Investigations show not only that standards are seldom expressed in terms that can reasonably be described as explicit, but also that – because of the very nature of any process of judgement – there are ultimately likely to be limits to the extent to which standards can be made explicit. Despite these caveats, the GSP concludes that the Council's definition of academic standards is one that should be strongly upheld and promoted in UK higher education.

4.5 In the autumn of 1995 the Council reported its interim findings to the CVCP, SCOP, the Conference of Scottish Centrally Funded Colleges (CSCFC), the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (COSHEP) and other bodies representative of higher education, and published the *Graduate Standards Programme: interim report* in December of that year. This report analysed and consolidated the findings from several commissioned projects, consultations and investigations undertaken as part of the GSP. It also drew strongly on other Council activities, not least its developing work on the external examiner system and the preparation of *Learning from Audit 2*. During the course of 1996, six supplementary reports were published to elaborate the research and consultations that had contributed to the findings of the first phase of the Graduate Standards Programme (see Annex B for details).

4.6 The *Interim Report* highlighted a number of issues for attention by institutions in the short term, as well as others for further development. These, in essence, were that:

i) the notion of comparability of standards, as hitherto understood, no longer commanded general support;

ii) the concept of comparability, in consequence, needed to be redefined in the context of a large and diverse sector;

iii) academic standards, with certain exceptions, were generally implicit rather than explicit;

iv) the titles of awards were confusing and ambiguous;

v) threshold standards were unfamiliar and tended to be defined in negative and residual terms in fields where classified honours degrees were the norm (with certain exceptions, for example, in some professional degrees and, to some extent, in Scotland). Standards in honours degrees rested on a notion of 'satisfactory' performance, usually pitched somewhere in the second class honours category. Hence students who were awarded pass degrees within an honours scheme (that is, who reach a threshold standard for a degree) tended to be regarded as having performed less than satisfactorily, but not so badly as to have failed;

vi) the establishment of threshold standards would be difficult, at best; at the level of broad subjects it did not appear to be feasible, although it may be possible at the level of sub-disciplines;

vii) the possibility of agreement on the qualities expected of graduates (graduateness), including generic attributes and skills, as a basis for threshold standards, was worth exploring;

viii) an increasing desire to find ways of articulating (in explicit and publicly accessible terms) the standards and criteria for judgement associated with programmes of study was evident across higher education. This was for the benefit of intending students, employers and society at large. Some educational developments were seen to be already encouraging such explicitness – for instance, modularisation, credit accumulation and transfer, and work-based learning.

4.7 Three themes emerge from these findings: **comparability of standards, clarity and explicitness**, and **support for academic judgement.**

4.8 **Comparability of standards:** a central conclusion of the first stage of the GSP was that comparability of standards had become increasingly problematic. The second stage (see below) strengthened this. For example, statistical research commissioned by HEQC from Professor Keith Chapman of the University of Aberdeen considered degree results in eight single honours subjects in pre-1992 universities over a 21-year period (1972-1993). The study found that:

- there was considerable variation in the pattern of degree classifications between subjects;

- there was a clear trend over time, varying somewhat between subjects, for an increasing proportion of 'good honours' (first or upper second) degrees to be awarded. In 1972, lower second honours was the commonest class of degree in all eight subjects, by 1993 upper second honours had become the commonest class of degree in seven of them;
- there were substantial variations in the proportion of good degrees awarded by different universities in the same subject, and these tended to persist over time;
- there was a positive correlation department by department (varying in strength across subjects) between entry qualifications and final classifications, although there were cases where departments accepting students with above-average entry qualifications awarded a below-average proportion of 'good honours' degree classifications and *vice-versa*. (For further details see Annex B.)

4.9 The second stage produced further evidence (for example, from the Council's work on graduateness, on awards and on external examiners) that the notion of broad comparability – in the sense of equivalence of output standards in all degrees in a subject – was under strain. Indeed, many participants in the Council's work questioned whether such a notion of comparability had any place in a diverse system. This suggests a need to seek other approaches to comparability.

Comment

4.10 It is important that this finding is correctly understood. It does not mean that standards have 'fallen', or for that matter 'risen', or are otherwise insecure. The GSP has not reported on such an issue, nor was it asked to investigate it. Indeed, there are no straightforward or dependable means of reaching a conclusion at a national level on such a matter.

4.11 What the finding means is that there are as yet no generally agreed measures that enable a secure judgement to be made as to whether, for example, the standard of one degree in a given class, in a given subject, is comparable to that in another institution; still less, whether there is comparability between subjects, and over the passage of time. The finding reflects the fact that rapid change in UK higher education has rendered inappropriate, or cast doubt on, the effectiveness of mechanisms that were formerly believed to have ensured comparability of standards. Comparability has become implausible because there are now no agreed and widely understood parameters with which to chart similarity or dissimilarity.

4.12 **Clarity and explicitness:** a central theme of the findings of the first stage of the GSP was that academic standards, with certain exceptions, are typically tacit or implicit. This has been reinforced by work (including quality audit) that revealed further evidence of a lack of explicitness in the intended outcomes of degrees and the criteria against which these are assessed. A project on assessment suggested that the criteria for the assessment of student performance are not always fully explicit, and that, even where attempts are made to render them so, this appears to have had only a limited effect on how assessors make their decisions (details in Annex B).

4.13 Not only does a lack of explicitness exist, but also a lack of clarity. In a study of degrees in surveying and the work on awards (details in Annex B), it was evident that programmes leading to degrees with similar titles may, in practice, have significantly different purposes, content or emphases. Divergent titles may mask similarity, although this is an issue that institutions acknowledge and are trying to address.

4.14 Participants in consultations on 'graduateness' were also unclear whether a graduate today (when three in ten young people enter higher education) should be expected to possess the same general characteristics, specialised subject knowledge, or capacity for personal and intellectual development as 15 years ago (when fewer than half as many did so). While diversity was welcomed, it was agreed that differentiation of purpose and outcome needed to be made clear.

Comment

4.15 Judgements of academic standards are ultimately rooted in the shared (and often tacit) values of a specialist academic community because they generally derive from expert practice that is only possessed by that community. Nevertheless, a substantial element of explicitness of aim and outcome is required if students are to appreciate what is expected of them, employers are to be clear what a qualification signifies, and staff are to ensure that they employ the most appropriate means to facilitate and assess students' learning. The GSP has identified the need for points of reference to clarify both the meaning and comparability of degrees.

4.16 **Support for academic judgement:** another theme conspicuous in both stages of the GSP was that the frequent interaction of academic peers, and their participation in shared activities, is essential to the development of the common understanding of standards on which academic judgement ultimately rests. The preservation and strengthening of this judgement is a necessary condition for the maintenance and improvement of standards. As higher education has expanded and diversified, however, changes have taken place that have eroded opportunities for the interaction of peers and the sharing of practice.

Comment

4.17 Some institutions and subject groups have addressed this issue by providing occasions to foster more academic interaction. These initiatives deserve to be more widely known and practised. TQA has also provided such an opportunity. In addition, the GSP suggests that new mechanisms may need to be developed to provide opportunities, perhaps across institutions, for sharing of perspectives on the setting, measuring and monitoring of standards.

5 THE SECOND STAGE OF THE GRADUATE STANDARDS PROGRAMME

5.1 Background

5.1.1 The CVCP, after discussion of the interim findings, requested HEQC to undertake further work including:

i) exploring whether it would be possible to develop agreement on the qualities expected of graduates ('graduateness'), including generic attributes and skills;

ii) developing a convention to govern the use of degrees and other award titles;

iii) strengthening the system of external examiners to underpin standards;

iv) identifying what might constitute threshold standards for degrees and diplomas.

The second phase of the GSP concentrated on these four issues and, in doing so, commissioned various additional projects that are described in Annex B. Each of these issues is now discussed in detail.

5.2 Generic graduate attributes and skills ('graduateness')

5.2.1 ***Consultation on 'graduateness':*** the Council undertook extensive discussions, investigation and collaborative projects on the delineation of the qualities or attributes expected of graduates in modern higher education (see Annex B for further details). The neologism 'graduateness', initially coined by participants in the first stage of the GSP, was used as a device to focus attention. The term was intended to embrace those features that make a programme of study or a level of student achievement degree-worthy. A particular interest was taken in academic attributes or skills of a general nature, as well as those that are subject-specific. It was recognised, however, that in practice general attributes would often be developed and realised within the context of the study of a particular discipline.

5.2.2 Discussion of the concept of 'graduateness' – its strengths and weaknesses – attracted a good deal of public interest, and stimulated considerable debate about the purposes of higher education

itself a contribution towards greater explicitness about the outcomes of first degrees. Participants commented that these discussions reflected the concerns of many sectors of the higher education community and beyond. This was illustrated by the volume of responses to HEQC's consultation papers, by the number and variety of institutions and other bodies that collaborated in investigations and discussions, and by the numerous presentations that HEQC staff have been invited to give on the topic to national and international audiences.

5.2.3 In what follows, the findings of the 'graduateness' project are presented under six headings:

i) institutional views of 'graduateness';

ii) 'graduateness' in relation to particular subjects;

iii) students' views of 'graduateness';

iv) employers' views of 'graduateness';

v) the assessment of 'graduateness';

vi) overall findings on 'graduateness'.

5.2.4 ***Institutional views of 'graduateness':*** the views of universities and colleges on 'graduateness' were collected through commissioned work with a representative panel of 14 higher education institutions and from submissions in response to the Council's discussion paper (for details see Annex B). The central expectation identified by institutions was, perhaps predictably, that graduates should have a grounding in a discipline(s) or other coherent programme of study. One institution defined this grounding as the possession of '...the basic and essential principles, concepts, theories, issues, methods, tools of analysis and interpretation, and skills of a discipline'. Several institutions took the view that a generalised notion of 'graduateness' would be meaningless. Others, however, perceived no conflict between the acquisition of specialised subject expertise and the possession of generic attributes, arguing that the mastery of a discipline or disciplines was the most effective way of developing generic qualities (not least, work-related skills), provided that the teaching and assessment of students had been planned with this in mind.

5.2.5 All institutions in the panel believed it possible to identify common attributes across subjects, but reported that the extent of agreement on these attributes and support for the notion of 'graduateness' varied across faculties and subjects. Science subjects emphasised the range of practical experience, the ability to apply knowledge and understanding to solving problems, and the need for up-to-date knowledge based on an awareness and understanding of current research. The arts and humanities were more inclined to highlight the ability to tackle problems involved in the study of their discipline, for example, interpreting diverse phenomena, making historical and comparative judgements, and probing epistemological and philosophical issues, values, and contextual factors.

5.2.6 General academic skills or abilities such as critical reasoning, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and the identification and solution of problems were cited as attributes of 'graduateness' by most institutions. Science subjects, it was reported, accord particular importance to the formulation and testing of hypotheses. Arts and some scientific subjects regard highly the demonstration of logical, coherent and sustained argument, supported by evidence with relevant and accurate citation of reference material.

5.2.7 For several institutions an awareness of the contexts and boundaries of the knowledge acquired was an attribute of 'graduateness', as were its social, environmental and ethical implications; these qualities, however, were not always articulated explicitly. The ability to undertake independent and active learning was also distinguished as a distinct attribute of 'graduateness' in several cases, as was, to a lesser extent, personal development.

5.2.8 All institutions on the panel referred to certain skills of general application, which are frequently termed 'transferable skills', as important to 'graduateness'. These generally included

skills of communication (written, oral and presentational) and might also embrace competence in IT, time management and team work. In certain institutions, such attributes were included as elements of general academic skills or as interpersonal skills and awareness. These types of skills have now become widely known as the six 'Key Skills'.

5.2.9 A number of institutions suggested that the modularisation of their curricular and assessment structures had had significant repercussions for the meaning of what it was to be a graduate. Within a complex modular system, it was argued, ensuring the achievement of a common set of graduate attributes was not straightforward, with the consequence that some form of integrative or synoptic assessment of generic abilities might be desirable, to supplement the assessment of individual modules.

5.2.10 Several institutional submissions considered the relationship between 'graduateness' and employability. While the two were not regarded as synonymous, many thought that in a time of shifting employment patterns, the notion of 'graduateness' remains highly relevant as a general preparation for numerous categories of employment. In the emerging employment market, it was generally agreed, graduates should be able to demonstrate self-reliance, resilience, adaptability and a readiness to prepare for change.

Comment

5.2.11 Many institutions used either the discussion paper or their preparation for a contribution to the institutional panel, to prompt reflection and discussion among their colleagues, and sometimes to contribute to an existing debate about the characteristics and qualities that the institution as a whole wished to encourage in its graduates. The 'graduateness' debate, they reported, had helped their institution to clarify and render explicit a range of common attributes that had already been implicit in its practice. Some indicated that they found it useful to consider the attributes expected of graduates in terms of the categories: field-specific, shared, and generic.

5.2.12 It was noticeable, too, that although institutions showed signs of giving increasing emphasis to particular overall characteristics, or to ways of reflecting their missions, there were often significant divergences within an individual institution between how particular subject groups understood the meaning of a degree.

5.2.13 The project was able to draw on, and contribute to, work in a number of institutions on the growing expectation that a degree should set out explicitly to equip graduates with certain generic attributes that go beyond traditional definitions of academic knowledge and skills. Such attributes, widely held to be important both for work and for life as a whole, have been variously described as core, key, transferable and higher intellectual skills. Some have been termed employment-related or enterprise skills. Many institutions have sought opportunities for students to acquire such skills. However, it is not always clear how far the development of generic skills is made explicit in the curriculum, nor what relative value is placed upon them in the process of assessment. In facing such challenges, institutions are developing means by which to show where these skills are taught, practised and assessed. Students are also being encouraged to evaluate their own progress towards acquiring generic skills. Work undertaken within the 'graduateness' project has enabled these developments to be disseminated more widely.

5.2.14 ***'Graduateness' in relation to particular subjects:*** in addition to the general consultation on 'graduateness', a number of activities were directed towards exploring what 'graduateness' might signify in the context of particular subjects and areas of professional practice (see Annex B for further details).

5.2.15 No overall pattern emerged from the written submissions of 36 subject-based groups and professional and statutory bodies, with responses varying from enthusiasm to scepticism. In general, traditional academic fields in both the arts and sciences inclined to the view that the characteristics of a graduate, if definable at all, are subject-specific. Newer academic disciplines

(such as business studies, hospitality management, environmental studies, computing, and the professions supplementary to medicine) were more sympathetic towards generic definitions of graduate attributes – though they were still principally interested in subject-specific elements. Representatives of disciplines in the performing arts revealed interest in the delineation of attributes of a general character and considerable overlap between those identified. Representatives of environmental studies argued for the importance of developing a notion of 'responsible citizenship' within degrees.

5.2.16 Nevertheless, even those most suspicious of a generic approach endorsed some generic attributes, provided these were contextualised for the subject in question. Among the attributes proposed, communication, research and data-retrieval skills and critical thinking occurred regularly. Synthesis, reflective practice, motivation for independent and continuing study, interpersonal skills, and time management occurred somewhat less frequently.

5.2.17 In a workshop specifically organised for subject-based groups (at which some sixty different subject areas were represented) more support was expressed for the concept of 'graduateness', although consensus was not achieved. Subject groups representing mathematics, natural sciences and technology were more sympathetic to the notion of 'graduateness' than their written responses might have suggested. One reason for their view was the recognition that knowledge in their fields had expanded to such an extent that it could no longer be mastered in its entirety. The acquisition of generic skills such as 'learning how to learn' or information retrieval was therefore becoming more important.

5.2.18 A number of subject groups queried whether similarities in the vocabulary of 'graduateness' used by different disciplines represented more than superficial resemblances between the attributes in question. (Support for this concern was found by the project on the assessment of 'graduateness' (see paragraphs 5.2.45–55)).

5.2.19 Investigative work in particular subjects and in a research project that tested a pilot Graduate Attributes Profile (GAP) (attached in Annex C) found significant agreement that it was both possible and desirable to identify generic attributes that are, in large measure, common to the various subjects examined. The five broad categories of attributes proposed in the GAP are:

i) cognitive;
ii) subject mastery;
iii) social;
iv) individual;
vi) practical.

These were generally judged to be appropriate, and there was agreement that the majority of the attributes within this framework were of generic reference. However, there was some disagreement about meanings – even within a subject – and about the location of attributes in particular categories. One supplement to the GAP, which was noted in the research, and also figures in a number of subject association responses, concerns qualities such as willingness to learn, learning how to learn and the capacity for lifelong learning.

5.2.20 A specific project on degrees in surveying illustrated the diversity of sub-specialist areas available, though not easily discernible, in one vocational subject. It thus demonstrated numerous potential sources of mismatch between the intentions of the providers of these degrees and the likely perceptions of them by students and employers. It suggested that it might be possible to develop a typology that could be used to clarify the range of educational orientations of programmes in a particular subject in relation to the expectations of various interested parties. It is necessary to test these findings and extend the work to other subject areas, particularly in relation to a typology of programmes.

Comment

5.2.21 It is unsurprising that representatives of subject-based bodies, when asked to specify the characteristics of graduates in their fields, placed the greatest emphasis on that which is specific to their particular subject. What is significant, perhaps, is that, having done so, most are then prepared to sketch out qualities that are broadly common with those identified by cognate fields, if not more widely.

5.2.22 Despite evidence of initial resistance to a generic conception of 'graduateness', there are signs of a growing recognition among many subject specialists that ways need to be found to create a language capable of clarifying the position of degrees and their component modules relative both to one another and to some general set of dimensions. A number of subject associations have expressed interest in exploring such issues in collaboration with HEQC.

5.2.23 Although many of the pressures in this direction come from the various client groups of higher education, some also arise directly from changes taking place in higher education itself. The introduction of modular structures, for instance, brings disparate disciplinary cultures into juxtaposition with one another and requires the combination and calibration of students' performance across the boundaries of these disciplines – where no common language exists. However, parallel research within a project on the assessment of 'graduateness' pointed to conceptual and practical problems concerned with trying to calibrate student performance across different disciplines (see paragraphs 5.2.45–55).

5.2.24 It is worth noting that few subject associations are accustomed to giving formal or systematic attention to 'graduateness' or, indeed, to the output characteristics of degree programmes in their subject. Professional and statutory bodies have long undertaken the accreditation of programmes. But such accreditation usually relies on input and process measures of standards (curriculum, assessment mechanisms, and so on) rather than focusing on outcomes, unless the degree is also a licence to practice, or contributes significantly to the assessment of competence to practice (see HEQC, 1996g – summarised in Annex B, which mapped quality and standards in the accreditation processes of professional and statutory bodies).

5.2.25 Many subject associations have traditionally seen themselves primarily as learned societies, concerned more with direction of and promotion of research than with the characteristics of a degree in their discipline. In some subjects, groups of 'Heads of Departments' exist, which offer a more receptive forum for the discussion of questions such as 'graduateness'. But such groups are more developed in some subjects than in others, are often rather informal and may meet only infrequently. There is an opportunity for subject-based groups to take a more active part in the clarification of standards in their fields, building on the good practice of some subject groups, which assemble external examiners to share perspectives, or which undertake research into possible lines of development for degrees in their field.

5.2.26 It was remarked that the Council's workshop for subject associations was a rare occasion, unique in some participants' experience, because it was designed to encourage the exchange of perspectives on degree standards across subject boundaries.

5.2.27 There appear to be no national fora concerned with the articulation of graduate attributes in programmes of a very general and non-subject specific character.

5.2.28 ***Students' views of 'graduateness':*** the project collected the views of students on 'graduateness' through a commissioned inquiry and by contributing to and drawing on projects by other researchers (for details see Annex B).

5.2.29 The findings suggest that students see 'graduateness' principally in terms of employability and the development of skills and personal attributes. For students in the sample studied by the Council, becoming a graduate was primarily regarded as an experience through which individuals

could develop general attributes commonly considered valuable to employers or for a professional qualification, and thus secure employment that is interesting, challenging and profitable, and that provides opportunities for the further development of skills.

5.2.30 At one extreme, students on specifically vocational courses such as dentistry, did not identify themselves primarily as preparing to be graduates, but rather as trainee professionals. There were those who thought it inappropriate to expect graduates in fields such as medicine or dentistry to possess qualities shared with graduates in non-clinical fields. By contrast, students on less obviously vocational courses were concerned with developing what they perceived to be employment-related attributes of more general application.

5.2.31 Many students also gave emphasis to the development of personal attributes, often in ways that were coloured by values derived from the world of work. The generic attributes they reported as valuing most highly were nevertheless frequently ones such as 'learning to learn', 'independence' or 'ethical awareness', with obvious relevance to personal development. Students nevertheless largely took the view that the generic attributes expected of graduates were best fostered and acquired through the study of particular subjects, rather than by some independent means, and that no additional processes were required by which to assess them (see also Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). That said, where certain skills (for example, team-work) are specified as part of a course, students recognised that it is appropriate that they be assessed. Mature students differed in their views of 'graduateness' from their younger counterparts, giving greater importance to personal development than to employability (see also Woodley, 1995).

5.2.32 Research by the CSU-AGCAS-IER (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996), with which the Council liaised closely, suggested that students perceive three groups of attributes that are acquired through the experience of higher education: 'traditional academic skills', 'personal development skills' and 'enterprise skills'. Differences, related both to discipline and to type of institution, were found in students' perceptions of the relative weight of these types of skill in the programmes they had studied. Nevertheless, the majority of students were found to have chosen their particular programme out of the enjoyment of studying a subject or subjects, especially so in the arts and sciences, and only a minority to have chosen a programme motivated by relevance to specific employability – most often so in law and business studies. A small minority were studying a programme for negative reasons, such as the inability to enrol on a preferred course, or under pressure from others.

Comment

5.2.33 It is noteworthy that students do not lay the same emphasis as academics or institutions on the significance of a grounding in a specific discipline or disciplines. For students, the principal feature of 'graduateness' is its relation to employability and to personal development. This suggests that it may be desirable, in order to inform student decisions, to develop ways of displaying the relationship of programmes of study to such concerns, and of profiling different ways in which the delivery of relevant skills is approached.

5.2.34 Individual students differ in their motivations to study, and in their attitudes to the relationship of their programmes of study to employment. Some of these differences are linked to age, gender, field studied and type of institution attended but the evidence suggests that – overall – choice of programme of study is predominantly motivated by intrinsic interest. This should not be taken to mean that students ignore the relevance to employment of their choice of study. There is no evidence that graduates from courses perceived to be vocational are necessarily more employable, other things being equal, than those from traditional, apparently less applied courses (see Smithers and Robinson, 1995).

5.2.35 The fact that students tend to use the language of employment to articulate general attributes perhaps suggests a measure of conformity to others' expectations of them. Whether, and how, such general attributes might be included in the assessment of students is a complex issue. It involves

clarifying the attributes considered valuable by students, and how they might best be tested and recorded, for example, within degrees, through vocational qualifications, records of achievement or professional references. Some institutions have developed innovative ways of tackling these issues.

5.2.36 ***Employers' views of 'graduateness':*** the views of employers and their representative organisations were gathered by a number of means, including a review of major reports on higher education and employment, meetings with representative employer groups, and liaison with and participation in research and development projects in the field (details in Annex B).

5.2.37 Employers were supportive of the Council's work on 'graduateness'. Evidence was found of many differing but overlapping lists of graduate attributes desired by employers. These were largely grouped around the categories used by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ): communication, application of number, problem-solving, working with others and improving one's own learning and performance. However some, notably the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), gave increasing emphasis to such personal attributes as confidence, self-sufficiency and adaptability.

5.2.38 The work of the GSP and the investigations on which it draws suggested some refinements to this approach to graduate attributes. In particular, communication (and particularly speaking and listening skills in a variety of contexts) are a high priority for many employers but are sometimes reported to be insufficiently developed in many newly-recruited graduates. Team-working figures prominently among employers' desiderata, and is sometimes regarded as an attribute that the education system generally does little to develop, because of its emphasis on the individual. The evidence suggested that this attribute may be becoming even more important. Organisational developments such as 'delayering' and 'downsizing' are placing a premium on flexibility and the ability to interact with a much wider range of internal and external clients than was hitherto the case in many graduate jobs. References to information technology were less commonly found – though by no means absent – and references to application of number were rather rare (though this may be taken for granted in certain disciplines or occupational areas).

5.2.39 The growing unpredictability of the labour market, the increasing interest of small and medium sized employers in graduate recruitment and changes in the concept of a graduate career indicate an increased emphasis on the importance of self-reliance (see also AGR, 1995). Employers also expect graduates to be better than non-graduates at problem-solving, planning and organising (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997). Graduates are not universally expected to have skills of leadership from the point at which they are recruited because, increasingly, the possession of a degree is seen as only the first step on the ladder to management – a fact which puts a premium on 'having learned how to learn'.

5.2.40 In the most recent major piece of work on graduates and employment (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997), a continuum is posited covering 'adaptiveness' (fitting into the organisational culture), 'adaptability' (the ability to take initiative and manage change) and 'transformation' (the ability to lead and initiate positive change). This survey argues that employers want first and foremost adaptive graduates but with adaptable and transformative potential. Harvey, Moon and Geall make the case that traditional subject-based higher education engenders adaptable and transformative qualities but is less helpful regarding general employability skills. The report recommends that higher education pay greater attention to the latter and that employers be prepared to offer more work placements to students (see also AGR, 1995).

Comment

5.2.41 Like students, employers' identification of the attributes of 'graduateness' differ from those of institutions or academic specialists. Employers emphasise personal and inter-personal skills and adjustment to the world of work, rather than subject expertise (except in some technical fields of employment), which appears to be taken for granted or regarded as a medium through the study

of which more general qualities may be acquired. Some employers stress their own particular needs and do not always give importance to skills more generally needed for employability.

5.2.42 The labour market, more broadly reflecting forces at work in the world economy, is undergoing rapid changes, which appear to be creating fundamental shifts in the nature of work, in the structure of organisations and in the role of knowledge and its application. These forces bear particularly strongly on the employment of graduates, to such an extent that it is doubtful whether it is any longer useful to talk of a 'graduate labour market', as if it were a single entity.

5.2.43 Although recognition of these changes and their magnitude may help somewhat to distinguish which attributes are most likely to help graduates to gain employment, the main lesson to be drawn from them is the need for clarity, explicitness and specificity in the qualities signified by the possession of a particular degree. This is because many of the familiar, taken-for-granted assumptions about higher education, and those about its links with employment, no longer apply (see Section 1).

5.2.44 It is clear that students need detailed information about the nature and intended outcomes of programmes of study, and that employers need information about what may be expected of those who are awarded a particular degree. Such requirements are likely to become more urgent in the future, as more employers recruit graduates for the first time, more students are the first generation in their families to study in higher education, and the range of programmes and awards broadens further.

5.2.45 ***The assessment of 'graduateness':*** a project commissioned by the Council investigated the extent to which student assessment focuses on generic attributes, and whether these attributes might play a part in the delineation of threshold standards for degrees. (Details of the project, which considered four subjects across 14 institutions, are in Annex B.)

5.2.46 The work found that examiners used remarkably similar language to characterise the qualities sought through their assessment practices, not merely within a particular subject but across each of the four different subjects studied. It might seem, therefore, that the project went a long way towards confirming a view that there exists something called 'graduateness', which can be seen as common to all degree courses; and that levels, including a threshold level, could be defined in terms of these qualities and skills.

5.2.47 In fact, matters were more complex. The project found that the common vocabulary that had been observed was not used to describe the same attributes in every case. What is more, no strong grounds were found to confirm that the criteria and judgements used to assess students are common to different subjects.

5.2.48 The project report also commented on some of the difficulties associated with the definition of 'level' in higher education. The report questioned the utility of a notion of level in some abstract sense. It expressed doubts as to whether a level can, in practice, be distinguished from the activity of ranking the relative performance of a population of students who have undergone some particular form of assessment.

5.2.49 The project favoured the view that consistent assessment decisions among assessors are the product of interactions over time, the internalisation of exemplars, and the creation of assessor networks. Written instructions, mark schemes and criteria, even when used with scrupulous care, it was argued, cannot provide a substitute for these, although they do help to support assessors' judgements.

5.2.50 Another of the project's findings was that current trends in organisation and assessment in higher education (such as the rapid growth in numbers of students or modularisation) seem likely to hinder the formation of common understandings and shared standards even within an institution or programme. Those currently undertaking assessment in higher education had in many cases been socialised into a system in which the links between course design and assessment were close.

5.2.51 The evidence collected for this project confirmed the conclusions of previous GSP investigations that the assessment of undergraduate degrees is not carried out in terms of anything that could be identified as threshold standards. The fieldwork also confirmed the findings in paragraph 4.6 that a particular level of performance tends to be used as a reference point, and that others are defined as being above or below it. No examples were found of that point being a pass or a third – in some cases it was the first class; in others, the upper second.

5.2.52 The project concluded that the use of a common language across subjects and institutions does not necessarily mean that academics are employing a model of assessment in which cut-off points are the same. The common vocabulary reflects the administrative need for a cross-subject (and cross-institution) grading system that allows for the comparison of quite distinct and different types of substantive judgement. There is no attempt to ensure that, for example, student work regarded as a grade one (if one uses a grade scale from one to five for argument's sake) in classics is in fact sufficiently similar to that accorded a grade one in, say, chemistry. The process of making such equations is conceptually separate from the process of determining what actually are the 'substantive' judgements that describe particular levels in particular subjects.

Comment

5.2.53 The central implication of these findings is the need to protect standards by identifying and developing ways of clarifying and strengthening academic peer judgement. The confirmation and transmission of academic judgement is being undermined by various structural forces at work within higher education and its environment. Little evidence was found that the effect of current trends towards fragmented marking, formula-driven awards and small examination boards was being offset by any other, compensatory developments.

5.2.54 Clarity and consistency of judgement are enhanced by greater explicitness, and by the use of devices such as marking schemes and exemplars, the establishment of archives, and so on. But what is also required is the provision of new opportunities for staff to discuss and compare students' work to highlight the importance of assessment in the processes of programme design and validation. The project, as in other GSP investigations, found little evidence that the adoption of such measures was widespread – indeed, it appeared that changes such as the reduction in double marking were making it harder to socialise assessors and maintain reliability.

5.2.55 The project provided further evidence that the practice of higher education assessment is incompatible with an approach to the notion of threshold that defines a sector-wide set of outcomes that would describe explicitly and meaningfully the attributes either of a particular sort of graduate, or of graduates generally. Indeed, the major changes which have taken place over the last decade have produced an increasingly diverse sector, with far more types of degree than in the past; and this trend looks set to continue. What the findings point to is the need to provide a language and framework with which to chart diversity, together with means by which to maintain consistency of standards, and judgements concerning them, for awards of like nature and intended outcome.

5.2.56 ***Overall findings on 'graduateness':*** the majority view to emerge from the various consultations is that 'graduateness' is multi-dimensional. Indeed, some warned of the dangers inherent in assuming it to be singular or in seeking to develop it in that direction. Some personal and institutional submissions expressed concern about the encouragement of a prescriptive view of what should constitute a graduate. Such prescription, it was argued, would hinder innovation, limit desirable diversity and undermine depth of knowledge in a particular subject or subjects.

5.2.57 'Graduateness' is interpreted differently according to disciplinary context, and covers a range of dimensions, which include elements such as knowledge and understanding of a subject (or subjects), independent approaches to learning, particular intellectual skills and a variety of other social and personal qualities. It was considered neither desirable nor feasible to develop a concept of 'graduateness' made up of a single set of attributes that would or should be found in all degrees

(what was referred to as a 'check-list approach'). Such a comprehensive notion was thought to be so general as to be difficult to apply meaningfully in a variety of particular contexts, and also, if applied, likely to constrain innovation and diversity.

5.2.58 Nevertheless, there was agreement in general that graduates do (or should) possess various combinations of attributes that distinguish them from holders of non-higher education and sub-degree qualifications. It was noted that this could not, at present, be said with confidence of all graduates, particularly those who gained a low class of honours or a pass degree on an honours programme. Some participants were uncertain whether graduates from programmes where great choice of curriculum was possible were always assessed in ways that captured what was considered distinctive of a graduate.

5.2.59 At this stage, it did not appear that 'graduateness' offered a sufficiently sharp definition of level. Some of the attributes identified as belonging to 'graduateness' appear to be specific to higher education (for example, to have an understanding of the limits of a discipline, or a sense of the direction of contemporary research). But this could not be said of all, and some of the most commonly cited attributes, such as the possession of critical and analytical skills, are not in themselves specific to graduates and appear common to other levels of educational attainment. In order to serve as the basis for standards, the concept of level, it was argued, needs to be articulated in relation to learning objectives or outcomes that are specific to subject areas or individual programmes of study. This is a view that is also expressed in relation to the generic level descriptors being developed by regional credit consortia (see further comment on levels and credits below).

5.2.60 It is clear therefore that 'graduateness' is not, at least at present, sufficiently robust to be used to define the nature of a UK first degree or to offer a threshold standard for all degrees.

5.2.61 Nonetheless, many considered that the investigation of 'graduateness' had already begun to contribute to the generation of a language and conceptual framework which was needed to articulate claims to degree worthiness. Out of the diversity of understandings of what a degree signifies, a substantial consensus has emerged as to the **range of dimensions** that UK degrees now encompass. These dimensions can provide a set of generalised reference points, against which to position specific awards and programmes. (See Annex C for a provisional list of dimensions.)

5.2.62 Further development work needs to be undertaken to identify the qualities expected of graduates, and the criteria for their assessment, within a series of specific domains. These domains would include the specific missions of individual institutions, the aims of particular programmes of study, the epistemological bases, culture and methods of specific subjects, and the values and practice of vocational and professional subjects. Such development would enable universities and colleges to specify the particular expectations that they have of those to whom they award their degrees, and would help to clarify, for a wider audience, the diverse characteristics of programmes and awards. This work has been initiated within the GSP but it needs to be further developed and extended to all of higher education (see Annex C for a provisional list of dimensions).

5.3 Overall comment on the 'graduateness' project

5.3.1 It seems clear that most contributors from all interested parties recognised some family resemblances that are shared by at least clusters of degrees. It is also clear that there is general recognition that these resemblances can only be properly identified by understanding how they relate to contextual factors such as the nature of a discipline, the purposes of a particular programme of study and the particular characteristics of an institution or student 'market'.

5.3.2 At present it is hard to distinguish similarities and dissimilarities between undergraduate degrees for two reasons. The first is that there exists no shared language, or agreed set of measures, with which to distinguish difference or identity and, thus, to clarify the specific characteristics of particular programmes of study. The second is that, until recently, it was customary in UK higher

education to pay deference to an ideal of general comparability, without clarifying what this might mean, nor how it might be demonstrated. This led to a state of affairs in which heterogeneity tended to become obscured and homogeneity given unrealistic emphasis.

5.3.3 As a result of expectations of homogeneity, 'mismatches' have developed between what is offered and what is looked for. Hence the work on 'graduateness' has been valuable in focusing attention on what is involved in a degree; in encouraging reflection on how outcomes of various specific sorts are achieved and how they are assessed; and in assisting with the identification of the balance of attributes that are acquired through study of a subject. There is a need for greater clarity about degree outcomes, and for typologies, profiles, and frameworks, that will facilitate the understanding of similarities and differences so as to facilitate choice for students and employers.

5.3.4 From the acceptance that UK higher education is diverse, and appropriately so, three consequences appear to flow. There should be:

i) a clear, public vocabulary and structures to describe and plot this diversity (see recommendations 1–5 in Section 3);

ii) mechanisms to strengthen the exercise of shared academic judgement (see recommendations 6–12 and option 13 in Section 3);

iii) boundaries, or thresholds, to mark the limits of acceptable diversity (see options 14–19 in Section 3).

5.4 Developing a convention for academic awards

5.4.1 Following the finding in the *Interim Report* that the titles of awards are often confusing and ambiguous, the Council explored this issue further, working with eleven institutions representative of UK higher education, and also drawing on consultations with a range of external bodies.

5.4.2 This work suggested that the number and variety of higher education awards and programmes has risen rapidly in recent years and that the process appears to be accelerating. The development of new awards seems to have been largely unco-ordinated, both within and across institutions, and often appears driven by considerations of marketing rather than consistency of usage across the sector. Indeed, some awards have been conferred in very small numbers, and many are also little understood.

5.4.3 There is also a trend for the titles of awards to become longer, more varied and more complex. This appears to result from attempts to reflect diversity by linking the meaning and definition of titles more closely to the level and scope of the achievement signified by an award.

5.4.4 The survey provided evidence of considerable disparity of practice and also noted a number of titles that do not indicate clearly the level and nature of an award, or whether the award involves an element of practical experience or bestows a licence to practice. Examples of confusing usage are numerous. Among these are the use of terms such as 'certificate' and 'diploma' to denote both undergraduate and postgraduate awards. There is also a growing use of 'master's' that blurs the boundary between first degree and postgraduate level study. Examples include 'conversion master's' awards, which are postgraduate in time but not in level, and 'first degree master's', in which it is not clear whether the title indicates the attainment of a standard equivalent to that of a master's degree taken after graduation. The use of terms such as 'pass', 'ordinary', 'unclassified' and 'general' degrees also appears to be ambiguous and variable; it is unusual for degree titles to make clear the difference between 'honours in depth' and 'honours in breadth'.

5.4.5 Participants in the project agreed that the development of a convention, or set of guidelines governing the structuring and nomenclature of awards and the levels at which they were offered, would greatly assist the understanding of similarities and differences across institutions.

5.4.6 The recent HEFCE *Review of postgraduate education* (the 'Harris report', 1996) provides further evidence of inconsistency and confusion in the nomenclature of postgraduate awards and provides corroboration of the Council's findings. Its recommendations for a typology of postgraduate courses and for moves towards the standardisation of course nomenclature suggest avenues worthy of exploration for awards at other levels.

Comment

5.4.7 The picture that has emerged from the survey on awards parallels in many respects the findings of other GSP investigations. Like them, it provides evidence of individual institutions, and sometimes subject-based bodies, finding ways of responding to rapid changes within a persistently turbulent and competitive environment. Although these responses include numerous examples of good practice which could be identified and disseminated, they have, by their very nature, lacked consistency either within or 'particularly' across institutions. There is now growing acknowledgement (of which the recommendations of the Harris report are one sign) of the need to draw on the best features of existing practice to enable higher education collectively to construct a coherent and consistent framework for all its awards. Such a framework would clarify the nature of and relationship between higher education awards and provide a guide to consistency of practice in nomenclature. In due course it would also make it easier to plot the position of higher education awards relative to the awards of national awarding bodies such as Edexcel, SQA, QCA and professional and statutory bodies (see recommendation 3 in Section 3). In addition, a UK awards framework would enhance the capacity for UK awards to articulate with those of other countries.

5.5 Strengthening the system of external examiners

5.5.1 In response to the CVCP's request, and drawing on a substantial body of work on external examining, including a commissioned project (Silver *et al*, 1995), conferences and a formal consultation, the Council published its findings alongside a framework for external examining in the UK. The framework is designed to provide a consistent national approach to external examining, while maintaining sufficient flexibility within and across institutions.

5.5.2 The framework sets out the purposes of external examining as:

- assisting institutions in the comparison of academic standards across higher education awards and award elements;
- verifying that standards are appropriate for the award or award elements for which the external examiner takes responsibility;
- assisting institutions in ensuring that the assessment process is fair and is fairly operated in the marking, grading and classification of student performance.

5.5.3 The framework is based on the expectation that institutions will define and make explicit the aims of their system (or systems) of external examining, in particular the parameters of comparability which they employ. The framework acknowledges that the ways in which external examiners are used will vary between institutions, but would, nonetheless, embody a set of core expectations. These expectations are that external examiners should:

- provide assistance to institutions in the calibration of academic standards through the review and evaluation of the outcomes of the assessment process, and the moderation of pass/fail and classification boundaries;
- be involved in the review, evaluation and moderation of examination and other assessment instruments and practices;
- be members of, and attend, the appropriate examination boards, or assessment panels, to ensure fairness and consistency in the decision-making process;
- present a written report to the head of the institution, his/her nominee, or relevant agent,

assessment process and the standards of student attainment;

and that institutions should:

- give consideration to external examiners' reports and make a response to the external examiners and other relevant parties that outlines any actions taken as a consequence.

Comment

5.5.4 Institutions of higher education in the UK have made clear the importance they attach to external examining. However, like many other aspects of higher education, this system is in a state of flux as new roles, responsibilities and practices are being developed in response to changing curricular structures, diversity of programmes, increasing student numbers, new forms of assessment and the standardisation of regulatory procedures and protocols. These are shifting the focus of external examining and broadening institutional expectations of the functions of external examiners. It is increasingly difficult for external examiners, in this environment of increased student numbers and changing programme structures, to play a role of moderator, which many believe to be their most important function in ensuring the maintenance of standards and fairness to students in the assessment process. In addition, the role of external examiner as guarantor of comparability of standards has been rendered increasingly unrealistic both by a lack of explicit bench-marks for standards at a time of growing diversity of educational mission, and by increasing scepticism about the existence or value of general comparability. In consequence, many believe that the influence of external examiners has declined and should now be redefined and strengthened.

5.5.5 The framework published by the Council provides a basis for strengthening external examining and has been recommended for adoption by all institutions. The Council has also published new guidelines to support the framework for external examining (HEQC, 1996j). However, there is still more that can be done individually and collectively to develop the role of external examiners to underpin the security of standards (see recommendations 8–9 in Section 3).

5.6 Identifying what might constitute threshold standards for degrees and diplomas

5.6.1 Many of the activities of the second phase of the GSP sought to shed light on threshold standards, in line with the CVCP's remit to the Council. The evidence that emerged reinforced the finding of the *Interim Report* that, with the exception of certain special fields, the concept of threshold standards (that is, minimum acceptable attainment) is not central to the conceptual vocabulary or traditional practice within honours degrees in the UK (see, for example, paragraph 5.2.51). Nonetheless, the GSP found evidence of significant support in principle, both from within higher education and from outside, for the development of some kind of threshold or thresholds.

5.6.2 Some academics were attracted to the notion of a threshold because it appears to offer a new, explicit, minimum level of outcome in a system where traditional mechanisms for maintaining comparability have been eroded by structural change. They recognised that because threshold standards, by definition, concern only minimum acceptable performance, there would still be scope for universities and colleges to interpret performance above the threshold level in diverse ways appropriate to their particular missions. Many also appreciated that thresholds could benefit the academic community as a whole by establishing a minimum agreed level of expectation as to the meaning of a degree.

5.6.3 To higher education's external constituencies, the concept of threshold also appeared to offer an attractive means of achieving public accountability in a world where higher education has become a large-scale activity, which makes major demands on the public purse, touches a large proportion of the population and is of central importance to economic and social well-being. It is a commonly held view – especially by those representing higher education's external constituencies – that a publicly-accessible threshold standard would help to ensure that all stakeholders in higher education would be able to hold common minimum expectations of the meaning of a degree.

Comment

5.6.4 Although many judge the notion of threshold to be desirable as a means of ensuring broad comparability there are few signs of a consensus as to what, exactly, it would mean. Close analysis of the contributions to the GSP suggests that the notion typically tends to be understood as involving two interrelated dimensions. These might be termed 'coverage' and 'attainment'.

5.6.5 'Coverage' concerns those attributes the possession of which would be expected of someone whose performance reached the threshold standard. Thus, for example, graduates in a particular subject would be comparable with one another because they would be expected to know, understand or be able to do certain, specified things. 'Attainment' concerns the specification of how well a graduate would be expected to demonstrate any, or all, of the specified attributes. In academic practice these two elements typically interact with one another in complex ways – excellence in the demonstration of one particular attribute, for example, may often compensate for inadequacy in the demonstration of another, and examiners try to reach an overall judgement of a student's performance that is not simply the sum of the marks for each item of assessment. However, modularisation may be limiting the extent to which this is feasible, because holistic judgements on individual student performances are more difficult in a modular environment.

5.6.6 Those who contributed to the GSP frequently differed in the relative emphases that they placed on these two dimensions. When discussing threshold standards some contributors (including many who advocated common curricula) laid most stress on the need to ensure that a graduate in a particular subject would have covered particular theories or techniques, but did not necessarily place great weight on how comparability of assessment was to be assured. In contrast, there were others who laid most emphasis on comparability of attainment and were inclined to advocate greater sharing of assessment or external tests of various sorts.

5.6.7 The relationship of 'coverage' to 'attainment' in the assessment of students in higher education has often been hard to disentangle. In the typical single-honours degree of a generation ago it is likely that 'coverage' would have been specified by a syllabus cast in terms of content and that 'attainment' would have been represented by the judgement of internal and external examiners. In cases where assessment was predominantly, or exclusively, by unseen final examination, the 'coverage' signified by a particular student's degree was difficult to ascertain. That was because students were frequently only required to answer a minority of the questions set and because failure in a given question, or paper, might be condoned because of 'strength elsewhere'. The implicit rationale of the system was that assessment was a means by which to sample the extent of the student's grasp of the subject studied.

5.6.8 Although the situation is different today, the influence of the approach described above still persists and continues to affect academic culture. Any movement towards threshold standards would need to take account of these factors. Nonetheless, if the notion of threshold standards is to be understood in any strict sense, it seems inescapable that it should embrace the dimensions both of 'coverage' and 'attainment'. Measures that address one dimension do not necessarily have a direct impact on the other. For example, to stipulate that a number of topics must be covered in a degree programme does not in itself ensure a particular level of attainment by a student in each of them.

5.6.9 ***Methods by which threshold standards might be established:*** various ways of establishing threshold standards have been considered. These include both direct and indirect methods.

Direct methods:

- the specification of standards at the level of subjects;
- the specification of common or core curricula, common assessment or external tests;
- the specification of generic attributes.

Indirect methods:

The achievement of, or movement towards:

- consistency in grade boundaries, including a sharper boundary for progression between 'degrees' and 'degrees with honours';
- consistency in procedures and regulations;
- a strengthening of academic, peer judgement.

All of these methods are now discussed in turn.

5.6.10 ***The specification of standards at the level of subjects:*** during the first stage of the GSP, many academics expressed support for this method, which would largely be concerned with 'coverage'. But further investigations cast doubt on whether such an approach would be either feasible or desirable. The evidence suggested that although it did not appear possible to establish threshold standards for a subject, broadly defined, it might prove possible to do so for a specialism or sub-discipline (HEQC, 1996e). It was also recognised that in certain fields, especially those associated with accreditation by professional bodies, it might be both desirable and possible to move towards the establishment of threshold standards – again, ones likely to be primarily concerned with 'coverage'.

5.6.11 ***The specification of core curricula, common assessment or external tests:*** some support was found for the establishment of core curricula, shared curricula ('coverage'-focused) and common, or shared, assessment ('attainment'-focused) within some subject groups, at least for certain elements of particular awards. However, the diversity of fields within subjects, as well as the diversity of types of programme, programme elements and student pathways, militates strongly against any national approach to core or common curricula across all programmes, subjects and institutions. The notion of a national curriculum or national assessment regime for higher education was strongly rejected by a large majority of academics as undesirable and infeasible. They thought that universal national curricula and assessment, while possibly offering the lure of common standards, would constrain innovation, de-motivate staff, be expensive to implement and would not necessarily succeed in ensuring comparability.

5.6.12 However, a number of subject groups are working towards defining core elements in their field or sub-field, and many in professional and vocational areas are working to establish competence-based standards that can either be encompassed by degrees or can articulate with degrees. These trends are likely to continue. In addition, a significant number of contributors saw merit in the use of various forms of shared assessment in particular subjects, or parts, or stages of programmes. Indeed, there is evidence that a few schemes already exist in which two or more institutions share the assessment of their students in certain specific circumstances. So, too, a number of participants regarded the increased use of external tests (such as the GRE or GMAT in North America) as a desirable way of clarifying degree standards and thresholds.

Comment

5.6.13 It would be neither desirable nor feasible to introduce a national curriculum for UK higher education, nor to introduce universal, common assessment. However, in certain circumstances institutions, parts of institutions, and subject-based and professional bodies may find benefit in sharing curricula and assessment, as is already the case in a few instances. The cost of developing technologically-based materials may also lead to shared curricula.

5.6.14 ***The specification of generic attributes:*** the GSP (through its 'graduateness' project) gave considerable attention to the specification of generic attributes as a means of establishing a threshold, or thresholds, because this had emerged during the first phase of work as a promising approach. Although some consensus emerged as to the range of these attributes, there is considerable disagreement about their relationship to the context of a subject, their relative weight, specificity of level, assessability, etc (as reported above in paragraphs 5.2.56–62 and 5.3).

Comment

5.6.15 Generic attributes appear to be valuable as a basis for identifying generalised dimensions, and might involve both 'coverage' (in a rather general sense) and 'attainment'. However, standards can only be fixed in relation to specific learning objectives and performance criteria, interpreted through a common assessment culture based on shared practice.

5.6.16 ***Greater consistency in grade and progression boundaries:*** an approach to the development of threshold standards through an agreed minimum pass level for degrees across institutions has also been considered. This level might be at the present pass levels for ordinary degrees but could be associated with a 'satisfactory' level for honours so as to bring practice into line with academic value-systems. Some respondents saw advantage in following the latter approach since it could serve to differentiate degrees from degrees with honours and could clarify the attributes necessary to achieve progression from one to the other. It would also align UK practice more closely with that of other countries which offer honours degrees (such as Australia and New Zealand) and be consistent with assessment practice in modular degree structures and with wider access to higher education (see paragraph 6.2).

Comment

5.6.17 There is much to recommend consideration of this approach, which is associated mainly with 'attainment'; but it has to be acknowledged that its bearing on threshold standards is indirect. Its purpose would be to encourage academics to specify the minimum requirements for progression and graduation in positive terms. In itself, it does nothing directly to specify 'coverage' or 'attainment'.

5.6.18 ***Greater consistency in procedures and regulations:*** an approach to threshold standards through the development of more consistent procedures and regulations across institutions could take several forms, some of which have been tested in the second phase of the GSP or in parallel work within the Council. These embrace the institutional or departmental frameworks in which both quality and standards are managed, delivered, maintained and improved.

Comment

5.6.19 Greater consistency of procedures and regulations is desirable and would help to lessen random disparities such as those to be found in the decision rules for the classification of awards. In consequence, this measure would contribute towards threshold standards by providing for greater comparability of attainment (see recommendation 10 in Section 3).

5.6.20 ***Strengthening academic peer judgement:*** another indirect approach to threshold standards that also concentrates on 'attainment' is one that sets out to clarify and strengthen the judgement of academic peers and to improve the mechanisms by which these judgements are disseminated. This approach would involve implementing measures to offset the factors that appear to be eroding the basis of shared academic judgements (as above). These would include such things as the facilitation of subject-based networks, the creation of more occasions for the sharing of judgements, the wider use of exemplars, the training of assessors and so on.

Comment

5.6.21 This approach has the merit of building upon existing practice and would compensate for some of the forces that have increasingly come to threaten the cohesion of disciplinary communities and the induction of new staff into them. Nonetheless, growth in the number of subjects and the spread of programmes in which the study of a subject is not the dominant organising principle may create difficulties of implementation (see recommendations 10–12 in Section 3).

5.6.22 ***Overall findings on what might constitute threshold standards:*** the overall conclusion of the GSP is that, while there is much support in principle for threshold standards, there are a number of technical and practical difficulties in the way of establishing **direct** threshold standards (ie, within broad subject areas, through common curricula or assessment, or through the specification

of generic attributes). While each of these approaches can be (and in some cases is being) pursued in different fields, or in some institutions, they are far from being universally applied or applicable.

5.6.23 It seems that the best way forward is to begin with an indirect approach, which will create the conditions in which threshold standards can be established, and to support specific initiatives within subject-fields or sub-fields and institutions that are aimed at developing more 'direct' standards (ie, minimum requirements for awards). 'Indirect' approaches include:

- the development of a range of generic dimensions (referred to in the draft report as expectations) for degrees that express outcomes in generalised terms so that individual programmes or programme elements and awards can be profiled and positioned in relation to this range (see recommendation 2 in Section 3);
- the promotion of greater clarity and explicitness as to the nature of different types of award, at both national and institutional levels, and of different types of programmes leading to specific awards (including reference to both 'coverage' and 'attainment') (see recommendation 1 in Section 3);
- the harmonisation or convergence of rules and procedures that govern assessment practice (see recommendation 10 in Section 3);
- the identification of mechanisms and opportunities to clarify, make more explicit and strengthen the judgements of academic peers (see recommendations 6–12 in Section 3);
- the development of 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 (see option 16 in Section 3).

In addition, further consideration should be given to the consequences for the development of direct threshold standards at undergraduate level and their implications for international comparability.

5.6.24 Specific initiatives to assist in developing 'direct' thresholds include:

- the development of profiling tools to assist in establishing the balance of knowledge, skills, understanding and other attributes embedded in degrees (see Annex C for an early example);
- support for subject-based groups and institutions in articulating threshold standards at 'local' levels (that is, within a given institution or subject group) (see option 15 in Section 3).

Comment

5.6.25 Although the principle of direct threshold standards of output for all degrees appears attractive, the specific investigations of the GSP suggest that generally a single threshold is unlikely to be practical or desirable. Furthermore, the HEQC's investigations have suggested that the establishment of a number of multiple thresholds, in the sense of a set of different minima for different clusters of degrees, also raises difficult problems.

5.6.26 Threshold standards must relate to institutions, to programmes and programme elements, and to particular professional or vocational fields. If greater comparability is to be achieved, they cannot also be independent of assessment criteria, assessment practice and wider quality assurance arrangements. In this respect, threshold standards are no different from any other kind of standards in higher education.

5.6.27 ***Threshold standards and the system of classified honours degrees:*** the evidence that emerged in the second phase of the GSP reinforced the finding of the *Interim Report* that, with the exception of certain specialist fields and to a more general extent in Scotland, the concept of threshold standards is not reflected in the conceptual vocabulary or traditional practice within honours degrees. Furthermore, the tacit conceptions of standards implied by the current practice of classification within the honours degree system seem to suggest that 'satisfactory' performance lies within the second class category

Comment

5.6.34 The Council's findings suggest that the dominance of the classified honours degree, and the values and practice that are 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 higher education system. Such a system must, by its very nature, be capable of accommodating students with a wide range of abilities, capacities and interests. It should also be capable of offering a suitably diverse range of awards at an appropriate range of levels, each of which is specified in terms of worthwhile, positively-defined attainment. This does not generally appear to be the case at present in the UK. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the attainment of many graduates is seen in terms of their relative deficiency rather than their positive achievement. This would appear to affect those who are awarded pass degrees on honours programmes, third class honours and, increasingly, lower second class honours.

5.6.35 Many participants observed that there is a tendency for students to regard as worthwhile only a degree with upper second class honours or above, and for some employers to take the same view (see also Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). It may be that these tendencies are connected with the general rise in the proportion of good degrees (firsts and upper seconds) awarded over the last decade (see paragraphs 5.2.28–32 and Annex B).

5.6.36 One conclusion of the GSP is thus that a review of the classified honours system is needed which should consider *inter alia* whether honours degrees should constitute the principal avenue of study for UK students. Such a review might also examine how the minimum requirements for a degree without honours could be defined in positive terms and how provision could be made for intermediary qualifications that would permit students to whom it was appropriate to 'exit with honour'. This would bring UK practice into line with that of other countries that award degrees with honours (see recommendation 14 in Section 3). A reshaping of the honours system could pave the way for a movement towards threshold standards and could also allow for the further development of student transcripts as a means of recording the range and variety of student attainment (see recommendation 5 in Section 3).

6 ADDITIONAL MATERIAL RELATING TO STANDARDS ARISING FROM OTHER HEQC ACTIVITIES

6.1 Analysis of standards issues in audit reports

6.1.1 ***Institutional audit:*** the Council's audit work since the autumn of 1994 has made a distinct contribution to the GSP. Audit reports on a large number of colleges and universities commended the initiatives being taken to develop more explicit statements of academic standards. In many reports, however, auditors noted a need to review committee and executive structures in order to eliminate overlapping roles and clarify the locus of responsibility for academic standards. Some institutions were advised of the need to give further consideration to ways of communicating specific responsibilities for academic standards to all staff in order to reduce variability of practice. The existence of such variability could, if unchecked, undermine the maintenance of sound and consistent academic standards.

6.1.2 Arrangements for the design, approval, validation and evaluation of programmes were generally judged appropriate by audit teams but, in some cases, it was noted that they would benefit from a greater use of external advice. A number of reports commented on the need for assessment practices to be consistent between different centres or academic departments within an institution and drew attention to the importance of monitoring student performance and analysing the distribution of marks. The development of explicit assessment criteria and their dissemination to staff, external examiners and students were noted and commended in a few reports, as was the use of double marking. External examining arrangements were generally regarded as sound, although in a small

number of reports, audit teams suggested the need for action. These reports drew the attention of the institutions concerned to the importance of ensuring that procedures for the receipt of external examiners' reports enabled course teams to respond, while also giving senior academic managers an opportunity (from their reading of the reports) to form an overall view of standards. (Please see paragraph 2 in Annex B for details of the institutional audits considered during this study.)

6.1.3 ***Audit of collaborative provision:*** audit reports on collaborative provision indicated that many institutions had devised sound and effective procedures for the validation of new franchises or programmes. In several institutions, however, there was a need to clarify the roles and relationships of committees with responsibilities for franchise arrangements, and the roles of link staff (staff responsible for franchising collaborative provisions). Further work was generally needed to strengthen annual monitoring and review arrangements, for example, by specifying aspects which partners should report on, and arrangements for consideration of external examiners' reports. Some institutions were commended for their commitment – through the consistent operation of their procedures – to ensuring that academic standards of programmes in partner institutions were the same as those in programmes within the university. The work of link staff, establishment of networks and fora for exchange of views, and staff development activity, were important in extending good practice, and contributing to the development of consistent assessment standards between partners.

Comment

6.1.4 Audit reports highlight key elements identified elsewhere in the GSP as central to the effective assurance of standards. These include:

i) explicitness about the standards expected and the quality assurance arrangements that underpin their achievement;

ii) clear articulation of responsibilities in relation to all aspects of standards;

iii) consistency in procedures (eg, those concerned with design, approval and review of programmes and assessment, grading and recording of students' learning and achievement);

iv) importance of monitoring student performance, and the distributions of marks and grades;

v) development of explicit assessment criteria, widely disseminated and understood by internal and external examiners and students;

vi) importance of objectivity in marking, guided by marking schemes and supported by double-marking and external examiners;

vii) responsiveness to external examiners' reports;

viii) formal support for collaborative arrangements including establishment of networks and fora for discussion of standards, and provision of staff development to provide professional practice in assessment.

These points, and others, are further elaborated in the revised *Guidelines on quality assurance* (HEQC, 1996j) (see also recommendations 6–13 in Section 3).

6.2 Structural change and the assessment of students

6.2.1 The present exploration of academic standards in higher education has not been undertaken in isolation from the realities of how degree programmes are provided and assessed, or how their quality and standards are managed and assured. Although the Graduate Standards Programme has concentrated on the specific remit given by the CVCP, HEQC has, through its developmental and audit work, attempted to understand these broader contexts within which the standards debate is being conducted.

6.2.2 An important strand of the Council's work has been to explore the consequences for academic standards of the rapid restructuring of programmes that is taking place in higher education. Progressively, over thirty years, and dramatically during the last five, structures based on the

traditional linear model of the curriculum have been replaced by others based on units or modules. A unitised framework has been adopted by about 25 per cent of universities. In this, existing courses have been restructured into a number of units, which may or may not be of uniform size or be independently assessed. In contrast, 65 per cent of universities have adopted a modular framework. This is one in which the curriculum has been restructured into blocks of learning of more or less equal size, or a small number of standard sizes, which are normally separately assessed, and which may form part of several different programmes leading to different named awards. This means that about 90 per cent of higher education provision in the UK is now unitised or modular in form.

6.2.3 Such new structures tend to be highly flexible and may embrace many new types of programme, including those built on work-based learning or independent study, or which combine credits acquired from a variety of sources. HEQC's work on this topic suggests that it is now possible to distinguish over twenty structurally different kinds of degree programme in existence.

6.2.4 These developments have greatly increased the scale and complexity of the environment within which standards are set, students assessed, and decisions made to confer awards. Among other things, these changes have led to considerable pressure for consistency in regulations and in their consistent implementation across an institution as a whole. Internal diversity of practice has become more difficult to sustain. In order to regulate standards in this environment it has proved necessary to develop and expand whole-institution academic regulations to guide, support and control the boundaries of acceptable academic practice. Informal understandings and implicit assumptions which might have sufficed in a smaller and more homogeneous system of higher education are no longer adequate or appropriate.

6.2.5 However, as in the case of awards, institutions have often responded to change individually and instituted new practices in isolation from each other. While this may appropriately reflect diversity of educational purpose and mission, it can also lead to a lack of consistency which undermines the bases for comparability of standards. There is also some limited evidence (see SACWG, 1996) that suggests that differences in the regulations that govern the assessment and grading of students may lead to different final grade outcomes for similar awards in different institutions. Many respondents, with experience of operating new structures, have suggested that there is a need for new assessment frameworks that are designed to encourage greater consistency and convergence of practice. These frameworks might include elements such as: a common pass mark for modules; conventions regarding compensation; procedures for mark or grade aggregation; conventions governing credit requirements for modules and awards; and so on (see recommendation 10 in Section 3).

Comment

6.2.6 In addition to its formal remit, the GSP has sought to identify the consequences for academic standards of diversity in higher education. The increased heterogeneity of undergraduate programmes, together with the often new curricular and assessment structures that underpin them, has eroded an important basis for comparability of standards. In order to be able to compare academic standards it will be necessary to establish a range of new frameworks to support legitimate comparisons. Many of these would also strengthen the assurance of standards as a whole.

6.3 Academic standards and their relationship to levels

6.3.1 The GSP has illustrated that a central part of making academic standards more 'secure' (that is, more clear, consistent, equitable and assured) involves greater explicitness. Institutions must be more explicit, through the formulation of clear descriptions, examples, statements and criteria, as to the standards associated with particular levels of study.

6.3.2 The use of the term level in this sense is to represent the **measure of intellectual demand or difficulty** of a module or programme. For example, two modules may be compared to establish if they are of the same level or intellectual demand. The GSP has shown that there is no general

consensus that UK degrees are broadly comparable with one another – that is, it is by no means assured that the level of study of one programme will be equivalent to the level of study of the same programme in another institution, and at present, there are few means of comparison available to investigate this.

6.3.3 The notion of the level of study has, until now, been generally implicit, tacit and abstract. In general, the level of intellectual difficulty has been equated with a particular full-time academic year. For example, three levels of a particular programme would be equivalent to the three full-time years needed to complete the programme. However, this is no longer seen as appropriate. The development of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has been one change in the sector which has encouraged a move away from time-based notions of level. People are now beginning study mid-way through programmes, and a notion of level allowing this is required for their entry. These and other changes recently experienced by higher education (increased student numbers, modularisation, greater diversity of programmes, diversity of assessment practice etc) have led academics, in the cause of achieving greater security of academic standards, to try to make these tacit understandings more explicit.

6.3.4 One conceptualisation of the problem sees the explicit expression of academic standards as involving three aspects:

- the general intentions or expectations of what should be achieved by students;
- the specific intentions or expectations of what should be achieved by students;
- the actual learning attained by students.

These three aspects are set out below in more detail from the most general to the most specific (from 'high' to 'low').

6.3.5 ***Setting general expectations/intentions.*** The most general step in this process is to state explicitly a set of generic educational intentions or expectations, either for the **award** or for the **level** of study.

i) Award descriptions are general statements about what kinds of learning (knowledge, skills, understanding, attributes, etc.) are signified through the award (eg, BSc).

ii) Level descriptions are general statements about what kinds of learning (knowledge, skills, understanding, attributes, etc.) are expected at different levels of higher education. For example, for level 2 of a BSc, the range of purposes for that level would be stated. As mentioned above, the term 'level' here loosely corresponds to the notion of a full-time academic year.

6.3.6 ***Setting specific expectations/intentions.*** The middle step in the process is to use these general expectations/intentions to guide the preparation of more **specific** educational objectives for either a programme or a module of study.

i) Programme learning outcomes are specific statements which describe what knowledge, skills, understanding, and attributes students are expected to have acquired through a particular programme or course of study, within one level or award.

ii) Module learning outcomes are specific statements which describe what knowledge, skills, understanding, and attributes students are expected to have acquired through a particular module or unit of study, within a programme.

6.3.7 ***Assessing attainment.*** The most specific aspect in this process of achieving greater explicitness uses the statements generated in the previous step (specific expectation/intentions) to develop methods of assessing attainment and judging standards. It can involve the development of performance criteria and grade or classification descriptors, which assist with the judgement and grading of the actual learning attained by students.

i) Performance criteria are specific statements – and examples – describing the kinds of

performance that will demonstrate that students have attained the intended outcomes or specific objectives for a particular programme or module.

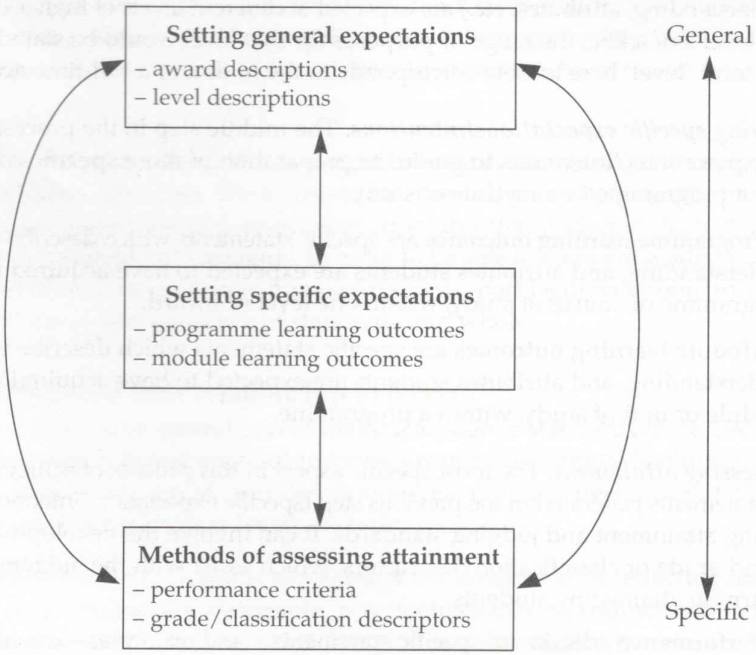
ii) Grade or classification descriptors are specific statements – and examples – that describe the relative performance of students against the performance criteria. The relative performance can be judged in a number of ways. Criterion-referencing can be used, in which work is graded according to specified performance against criteria described in detail. This leads to testing that is designed to check that students have indeed mastered the area of study (Heywood, 1989). Norm-referencing can also be used, in which the performance is graded against the performance of other students in the cohort. Thus, students are graded according to how they rank amongst their peers (Heywood, 1989). Alternatively, performance can be graded by judging the 'learning distance travelled' by the students. For example, greater learning is rewarded, regardless of the end point reached. This option requires the use of initial diagnostic tests or prior assessment.

6.3.8 If these processes are completed, the standards attained within an award level, programme or module become much more explicit, and form the basis for comparability across institutions. This, of course, is much more likely to be meaningful within subject areas or cognate fields.

6.3.9 The clarification of the expectations of students, and the standards actually achieved by them, at each level of higher education, will facilitate the comparison of such standards across institutions and over time. The concept of levels can facilitate the process of securing standards, but is by no means viewed in the same way across the higher education sector. A clear and agreed definition of levels is required for further progress to be made.

6.3.10 This process does not operate in a linear fashion but, rather, complex interactions take place. For example, anomalous results from the assessment process (for example, 70 per cent of students failing according to the criteria) might result in different assessment strategies, or might alternatively result in different generic or specific expectations/intentions. Each part of the process affects and interacts with every other part. These interactions are represented in the diagram below by the double-headed arrows.

Figure 1 A diagrammatic representation of a process of expressing academic standards explicitly from the most general aspects to the most specific



6.4 Credit

6.4.1 Credit accumulation and transfer schemes have expanded rapidly to embrace, in part or wholly, most higher education institutions. Credit is used as an internal accounting mechanism in all modular and most unitised curriculum frameworks; the phrase 'credit-based learning' is increasingly used in this context. Differences in the formulation of regulations relating to credit requirements mean that some institutions require students to obtain significantly more credit than others, in order to progress from one level or stage to another, or to obtain degrees with honours. This is an important issue for comparability of standards.

6.4.2 Credit is becoming increasingly related to the notional amount of time that it would take the average learner to achieve the learning objectives or outcomes attributed to a module or unit of learning at a given level. This notional time is intended to provide a rough guide to students on the amount of learning effort required, and to curriculum designers on the effort required by students to attain the learning objectives or outcomes of a module or, by aggregation, the programme. Notional learning time therefore provides an aid to the calibration of learning effort across modules and programmes.

6.4.3 Institutions vary in the way they have defined notional learning time; most have adopted either a 900 notional hour full-time equivalent programme year (a week of 30 notional hours over a 30 week academic year) or 1,200 notional hours (a week of 40 notional hours over a 30 week academic year). Another equally problematic issue is the credit rating of national 'named' awards (such as the ENB awards – English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting) which receive very different credit allocations.

Comment

6.4.4 This variation in notional learning time is a contentious issue because it may affect how the public and employers perceive the comparability of academic standards. This is one area where the interests of collective self-regulation might be best served by the adoption of an agreed convention.

6.4.5 The definition and award of credit, although at present taking place on a relatively small scale (through regional credit consortia – such as NUCCAT – and more widely through the Inter-Credit Consortia Agreement – InCCA), both possesses many implications for the general clarification and harmonisation of standards and is, in itself, a field where greater clarification and consistency appear to be required (see recommendation 10 in Section 3).

6.5 Conclusion

6.5.1 The findings of the Graduate Standards Programme, and the themes which have emerged from the Council's wider work, point to the need for development work of various kinds. Key themes include a need for greater clarity and explicitness about what is expected of and attained by graduates, for measures to strengthen the security of standards and for a redefinition of comparability of standards in a changing context. The efforts of individual institutions, groups of institutions, and subject and professional groups to respond to rapid change also need to be supported by some wider collective frameworks. The recommendations and options in the next section suggest some ways forward.

SECTION 3

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPTIONS AS PUT FORWARD IN THE DRAFT GSP REPORT

(NOVEMBER 1996)

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The draft report of the GSP laid out 19 recommendations and options. These were as follows:

RECOMMENDATIONS DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE GREATER CLARITY

1 Institutional explicitness about standards
2 Range of degree dimensions
3 Descriptive awards framework
4 Programme typology/profiling
5 Student transcripts

RECOMMENDATIONS DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE GREATER SECURITY/COMPARABILITY

6 Standards in programme design/approval processes
7 Training/development for internal assessors/examiners
8 Examiners' fora
9 External examiners
10 Alignment of assessment conventions/bench-marking of practice
11 Development and use of archives/data to evaluate standards
12 Structures/opportunities to identify and review standards
13 **Option:** separating assessment from delivery of programmes

OPTIONS PROPOSED ON THRESHOLD STANDARDS

14 Review classification system and place of honours degrees
15 Local thresholds
16 Progression thresholds
17 Thresholds for non-honours degrees
18 Thresholds for honours degrees
19 Review of international graduate tests (eg, GRE/GMAT)

1.2 In the light of changes that have occurred in higher education, and in the expectation of continuing change, the Council recommends a systematic and integrated approach to the management of academic standards involving institutional level activity, collective activity, and action at subject and programme provider levels. The overall purpose of the recommendations is to provide support to institutions and academics, individually and collectively, in their task of establishing, maintaining and improving standards in a climate of continuing change.

1.3 An integrated approach to academic standards has four main objectives:

i) to increase the level of shared understanding about academic standards within higher education;

ii) to improve the quality of information about standards for third parties so that it is accessible and comprehensible to students, employers, funding agencies and others;

iii) to provide further security for each institution's standards;

iv) to facilitate comparability of academic standards within defined boundaries.

These four objectives are reflected in the headings under which the recommendations and options

are grouped: clarity of standards, security and comparability of standards, and thresholds.

1.4 The focus of attention for the strategies proposed in the draft report was on 'output standards' (ie, the nature and levels of student attainment) and the points at which these were established and confirmed within UK higher education. The Council recommended that higher education should give greater attention to:

- clarifying responsibilities for establishing and reviewing standards;
- the collective means used to describe programmes, awards and student attainment (recommendations 1–5);
- the institutional processes used to approve programmes, and to judge and confirm student performance on those programmes (recommendations 6–10, options 13 and 14);
- the mechanisms needed at subject-level, and institutional responsibilities for articulating and setting standards (recommendations 1–5, option 15);
- the means of enhancing the skills of individual academics in setting standards and creating further opportunities for sharing peer judgements about standards (recommendations 8–10);
- the means of improving institutional capacity for monitoring, evaluating, calibrating and comparing standards, including the collection, analysis and use of institutional, national and international data, and data from other areas of education, training and employment (recommendation 11, options 16–19).

2 UNDERSTANDING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is important to note that the Council does not seek to define academic standards themselves (ie, the standards of French or physics), but instead seeks to strengthen the means by which such standards are identified, compared and assured. The recommendations are designed both to protect individual institutional autonomy and the collective responsibilities of the academic and professional community for the standards of higher education programmes and awards (see paragraph 2 of Section 2 above). Such measures, which assume a greater formal level of collective responsibility for standards than has hitherto existed, are recommended by HEQC to an expanded, diverse system which operates in an increasingly competitive international environment.

2.2 The use of national curricula or national examinations for all degrees as a means of ensuring comparability of standards has been considered, but is **not** recommended on the grounds that this approach would potentially inhibit diversity and innovation, both of which are vital to increasing participation in higher education and to maintaining international competitiveness (see paragraphs 5.6.11–13 in Section 2). Such an approach would also challenge the basic principle of institutional autonomy on which UK higher education is founded. However, there is scope for self-selecting groups, or pairs of institutions, to develop an approach which includes some elements of core curricula and common assessment in order to improve their own capacity for securing and demonstrating a level of comparability, which they consider to be appropriate to their awards. In some professional and vocational areas, core curricula or core competences are already in place.

2.3 The recommendations are directed to a variety of levels and groupings within and outside higher education. This is because responsibilities for defining, setting, judging, comparing and assuring academic standards are spread widely across those groups, individuals and institutions that contribute to the design, delivery and approval of programmes, assessment of students and the award of degrees (and other qualifications).

2.4 In the table below, the locus of action for each recommendation and option is indicated by a tick; and an asterisk identifies the other groups that are likely to be involved (but less so) or affected by each recommendation. In a few cases, action may need to be led from two points simultaneously. The recommendations have been developed out of existing good practice in the sector and out of

the developmental work undertaken by groups and institutions contributing to the Graduate Standards Programme. In a few cases, a recommendation or option represents a new approach which has emerged out of consultation with institutions, academics and others.

2.5 In considering the recommendations, institutions will want to reflect upon:

- the period over which the desired changes can realistically be achieved;
- the appropriate level of comparability of standards in a large and diverse higher education system;
- the level of resources needed to achieve the objectives;
- the necessary professional development activity required to promote change; and
- the external support required to facilitate internal change.

HEQC assumes that the recommendations directed at institutions collectively will be taken forward through existing channels (ie, HEQC/QAAHE and the representative bodies).

3 RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPTIONS

(as set out in the draft report in November 1996)

Recommendations and options	All institutions collectively	Institutions individually; and/or self-selecting groups	Subject/ professional groups
1 Institutional explicitness about standards		✓	
2 Range of degree expectations (subsequently renamed dimensions)	✓	•	•
3 Descriptive awards framework	✓	•	
4 Typology/profiling programmes	✓	•	•
5 Student transcripts	✓	•	
6 Standards in programme design/approval processes	•	✓	
7 Training/development for internal assessors/examiners		✓	
8 Examiners' fora		✓	
9 External examiners	•	✓	•
10 Alignment of assessment conventions/bench-marking of practice		✓	
11 Development and use of archives/data to evaluate standards	✓	✓	•
12 Structures/opportunities to identify and review standards		✓	✓
13 ADDITIONAL OPTION: separating assessment from delivery of programmes		✓	
14 Review classification system and place of honours degrees	✓	•	
15 Local thresholds		✓	✓
16 Progression thresholds	✓	•	
17 Thresholds for degrees	✓	•	
18 Thresholds for honours degrees	✓	•	
19 ADDITIONAL OPTION: review international graduate tests	✓		

Key ✓ = locus for action • = other groups involved/affected by recommendation

3.1 Recommendations designed to achieve greater clarity

(For details of rationale see paragraphs 4.12–15, paragraphs 5.2.14–27 and 5.4 in Section 2.)

Indicative timescales:

short term = 2 – 3 years
medium term = 3 – 5 years
long term = 5 years.

1 INSTITUTIONAL EXPLICITNESS ABOUT STANDARDS

Purpose: to clarify each institution's standards.

Recommendations: institutions to make explicit, and publicly accessible, the standards of attainment associated with different programmes and awards (eg, for awards: level of award, credit rating, if any, general description of award and award outcomes; for programmes: purposes, objectives and outcomes, including nature and balance of knowledge and skills elements, curriculum structure (core/optional/elective elements), award routes; assessment strategy/criteria, student support, career progression).

Indicative timescale: some institutions are already providing such detailed information. In the short to medium term, this requires development of exemplars and tools to facilitate a more consistent approach.

2 RANGE OF DEGREE EXPECTATIONS (SUBSEQUENTLY RENAMED DIMENSIONS – SEE SECTION 4, RECOMMENDATION 2)

Purpose: to clarify and publicise, at national level, the range of purposes (and broad outcomes) of degrees and to assist in achieving greater explicitness at institution/programme levels.

Recommendations:

i) HEQC/QAAHE to confirm, in consultation with institutions, a range of generalised expectations for degrees which would describe the range of attributes that are already embedded in current programmes and awards and/or are now sought by students, professional and statutory bodies, employers etc (a draft set of expectations – now dimensions – drawn from the 'graduateness' work undertaken by subjects and institutions is presented in Annex C);

ii) institutions, collectively, to adopt an agreed set of expectations based on the above as a framework for the profiling of individual programmes by institutions/academic units. Such profiles, which express the distinctive character of each institution's programmes, to be published in a form that is accessible to staff, students and employers.

Indicative timescale: short term for i); medium term for ii).

3 DESCRIPTIVE AWARDS FRAMEWORK

Purpose: to develop a descriptive awards framework within which institutions can locate their awards thus achieving greater explicitness at institutional level and greater consistency and comparability of approach at national level.

Recommendations:

i) HEQC/QAAHE to develop, in partnership with institutions and their representative bodies, a descriptive awards framework (linked to credits in the longer term) that provides a rationale for different types and levels of awards;

ii) institutions to review and profile their own awards in relation to this framework;

iii) internal and external quality assurance to test/verify institutional practice.

Indicative timescale: short to medium term for i), medium term for ii) and long term for iii).

4 TYPOLOGY/PROFILING OF PROGRAMMES

Purpose: to develop greater clarity at national and local levels about the types and educational purposes of programmes, and the standards they encompass.

Recommendations:

i) HEQC/QAAHE to develop and pilot, in partnership with institutions and other relevant groups (eg, subject associations, professional and statutory bodies), a typological framework with which to describe and locate different types of programmes associated with different educational purposes and standards (for an example of a pilot profile see Annex C). In due course, this information, when publicised, would illuminate the diversity and choices of programme available for different purposes;

ii) HEQC/QAAHE to develop, in partnership with subject/programme providers, a profiling tool to assist those responsible for designing, delivering and assessing programmes to make explicit the balance of knowledge, skills and other characteristics they were seeking to develop in their students. This work would also assist in developing a typological framework of programmes.

Indicative timescale: already being piloted in some subject/professional fields; medium term.

5 STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS

Purpose: to achieve greater consistency in presenting information about the nature and level of graduates' achievements to prospective recruiters of graduates, research councils and others.

Recommendations:

i) HEQC/QAAHE to review current approaches to student transcripts in partnership with institutions, and to consult on the adoption of a consistent form of transcript across institutions;

ii) institutions to review their approach to the provision of information about student attainment, relating to any general degree dimensions and to the specific outcomes of each student's programme.

Indicative timescale: medium term.

3.2 Recommendations designed to achieve greater security and comparability

(For details on rationale see paragraphs 4.16–17, 5.2.24–27, 5.2.49–50, 5.5, 6.1.2–4, 6.2, and 6.5 in Section 2).

6 STANDARDS IN PROGRAMME DESIGN AND APPROVAL PROCESSES

Purpose: to harmonise approaches to the validation and revalidation of programmes so as to ensure that all elements relevant to standards are addressed in this key quality assurance process.

Recommendations: there are three stages to this recommendation. The first relates to individual institutions in the short term. The second is a strengthened version of the first and would apply to all institutions only in the medium term since it is dependent on support for other recommendations in this report. The third is for consideration across self-selecting groups of institutions within their own time-scales.

i) Institutions, individually, to review their processes for the design and approval/validation of programmes/programme elements to ensure that full consideration is given to standards matters (eg, the nature and appropriateness of the standards set, the means of testing them through assessment, 'degree expectations', and the standards of performance required at the threshold level).

ii) Institutions, collectively, to agree and adopt a set of elements that should be considered and checked within programme design and programme approval and validation processes. These would be produced as guidelines to institutions by a new QA agency building on existing good practice and the revised *Guidelines on quality assurance* (HEQC, 1996j), in partnership with institutions. They would subsequently be tested in external quality assurance arrangements.

iii) Two or more self-selecting institutions to develop a collective approach to programme approval/validation through a shared external verification process. Professional body accreditation in the UK provides one model; other examples can be seen in international quality assurance arrangements.

Indicative timescale:
step i) already in train in many institutions;
step ii) short to medium term;
step iii) medium to long term, assuming agreement is forthcoming – time-scale variable.

7 TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR INTERNAL ASSESSORS AND EXAMINERS

Purpose: to ensure that all those who assess students are prepared for and supported in this task.

Recommendations: institutions, supported as necessary by external agencies, to provide training, induction, guidance and development opportunities to equip all staff who assess student performance with the appropriate range of skills for this task. Such training and development provide an important basis for the development of judgements about standards.

Indicative timescale: some institutions are already providing such training support as part of induction and certification of teaching staff. Such developmental opportunities need to be extended to all relevant staff; medium term.

8 EXAMINERS' FORA

Purpose: to enable those responsible for assessing students to review and evaluate their practice and the outcomes of the assessment process in the light of external perspectives on standards provided by external examiners or the examining experiences of staff in other institutions. Such a process can provide an important opportunity for professional development and for the development of shared understandings about standards to inform calibration of standards within and across institutions.

Recommendation: institutions to provide regular, scheduled opportunities for internal examiners to meet (separate from examination boards) to review assessment practice and to share perspectives on academic standards. This might be extended to include external examiners and examiners from other institutions and is important to the strengthening of peer judgement.

Indicative timescale: short to medium term: implementation on an annual basis.

9 EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

Purpose: to strengthen external examining and thereby, the monitoring, verification and comparability of standards across institutions (within parameters defined by institutions).

Recommendations:

i) institutions to adopt and implement the framework for external examining published by HEQC (Silver *et al*, 1995) and the guidelines to support effective external examining practice (HEQC, 1996h). Institutional action and approaches would then be reviewed in external quality assurance arrangements;

ii) institutions and subject/professional groups to explore new ways of supporting the important resource provided by the external examiner system.

Indicative timescale: short to medium term.

10 ALIGNMENT OF ASSESSMENT CONVENTIONS/BENCH-MARKING OF PRACTICE

Purpose: to improve the opportunities for direct comparison of assessment practice and academic standards between institutions with similar structures, programmes or awards so as to improve the bases for comparability of academic standards.

Recommendations: two approaches are proposed:

i) bench-marking assessment regulations and protocols: a group of self-selecting institutions (two or more) to compare and agree some common conventions on assessment regulations (eg, threshold pass marks, the algorithm used to define the final standard of award, whether all or a proportion of modules count for the award, compensation rules, mark or grade bands for honours, definitions and protocols for considering borderline candidates) in order to improve the bases for comparability of standards. Some institutions are already engaged in such activity;

ii) bench-marking assessment practice and programme outcomes: two or more programme providers offering comparable programmes or awards to engage (on a self-selecting basis) in periodic joint reviews of their standards setting and assessment practice at subject or programme levels (eg, review of assessment strategies, instruments and criteria, examination papers, samples of students' work, trends in overall student performance).

Indicative timescale: some institutions are already involved in collective analysis of assessment procedures, practice and outcomes and these provide useful models; medium to long term.

11 DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF ARCHIVES/DATA/INFORMATION TO EVALUATE STANDARDS

Purpose: to make available to institutions and subject groups national data and information, as well as international data, to improve the security of standards over time and to extend institutional capacity for monitoring, evaluating and understanding the reasons for trends in standards and to identify areas for improvement or change.

Recommendations:

i) at national level, relevant agencies (eg, HESA, QAAHE) to provide information and data (including international data) for institutions and subject groups to assist in the monitoring of standard setting and assessment processes, trends in awards over time and relationships between higher education awards and those in other parts of education/training;

ii) institutions to develop and maintain representative archives of assessment instruments, marks and grades, student responses to them, examiners' comments and reports as a basis for internal research, and evaluation of standards and aspects of academic practice;

iii) institutions to develop their capacity to evaluate and use such information to inform their policies in curriculum design and assessment and to support the calibration of standards;

iv) subject and professional groups to maintain representative archives of relevant data and to bring these to the attention of peers at relevant meetings and through publication.

Indicative timescale: some institutions and subject groups (and most professional fields) are already engaged in such practice and research and these provide useful models. In the case of some subject groups appropriate infrastructures may first need to be developed; medium term.

12 STRUCTURES/OPPORTUNITIES TO IDENTIFY AND REVIEW STANDARDS

Purpose: to strengthen the involvement of subject groups and professional networks in the articulation of standards by creating further opportunities to build common understandings and approaches among academic peer groups.

Recommendations: subject and professional groups to develop or extend existing mechanisms for underpinning standards, in partnership with institutions and QAAHE where appropriate (eg, maintaining 'expert' panels for validation/accreditation/external examining/assessing; directories of programmes/programme elements in field; relevant programme/award/progression statistics; statistics relating to progression into employment; mechanisms to monitor changes in standards at other educational or occupational levels, and internationally; formal opportunities to discuss and review standards).

Indicative timescale: already in train in some subject fields and many professional areas; medium to long term elsewhere, requiring, in some cases, the construction of appropriate infrastructures.

13 *ADDITIONAL OPTION:* SEPARATION OF ASSESSMENT FROM PROGRAMME DELIVERY

Purpose: to increase independence and objectivity in the assessment process. If shared across institutions, greater comparability might also be achieved. Different approaches are possible depending on the focus and range most appropriate to institutions. The following have been suggested:

Nature of option:

i) within one institution, or a group of self-selecting institutions, separate summative assessment from teaching by having a group of examiners appointed on a rotating/fixed term basis. Some institutions already adopt this practice;

ii) within a programme of study, enable some or all elements to be separately assessed.

Indicative timescale: medium to long term.

3.3 Options proposed on threshold standards

(for details of rationale see paragraph 5.6 in Section 2)

14 REVIEW CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM AND PLACE OF HONOURS DEGREES

Purpose: to review the current honours degree and classification system in the light of issues raised by a proposed move to threshold standards and in the light of international experience of operating a threshold approach.

Nature of option:

i) moving to a threshold approach to academic standards raises at least two questions about the honours degree and classification system: first, the relationship between honours and non-honours degrees; and second, the continuing utility of the present approach to grading and classifying student performance within the honours classification system;

ii) HEQC/QAAHE, in partnership with institutions, to undertake a survey of relevant internal and external stakeholders and international experience to review the place of honours degrees within undergraduate awards and the development of a classification system to meet contemporary needs.

Indicative timescale: short to medium term to initiate a review; longer term to implement consequent change.

15 LOCAL THRESHOLDS

Purpose: to establish greater clarity and consistency in descriptions of student performance expected at the threshold pass level.

Nature of option: two approaches are proposed. Ideally they should be linked and inform each other:

i) each institution to develop its own threshold standards (minimum performance criteria) for its programmes and awards in terms of the balance of knowledge, skills, understanding and other attributes expected of its graduates. These would be informed by any agreed collective dimensions of degrees (see recommendation 2 above, Annex C, work on 'graduateness' and relevant international standards). This approach would establish clarity, but little comparability in the short term, unless extended to self-selected groups of institutions with similar educational provision/aims;

ii) subject/professional networks (eg, conferences of heads of department/professors) to develop and agree guidance on minimum or key requirements for their field or sub-field. These would be informed by any collective expectations (or dimensions) of degrees, current work on 'graduateness' and relevant international standards, and in turn would inform institutional standards at programme and module levels.

Indicative timescale: i) already in train in some institutions, individually; short to medium term; ii) already in train in some subject fields, well-established in many professional areas; short to medium term in such cases and medium to long term elsewhere.

16 'PROGRESSION' THRESHOLD

Purpose: to establish a description of minimum acceptable performance for progression and to assess students against it so as to establish greater consistency and comparability of standards.

Nature of option: HEQC/single agency to pilot, in partnership with institutions, a threshold standard for progression from non-honours to honours level study: one example is provided by the Scottish system. Students might initially be accepted only on to 'first level' study, an approach that would mirror practice in relation to registration for doctorates. This would help to establish a threshold for honours level and would allow students to be awarded different kinds of degree or other qualifications, relative to different types and levels of attainment.

Indicative timescale: medium to long term.

17 THRESHOLD STANDARDS FOR NON-HONOURS DEGREES

Purpose: to establish a shared grade baseline and associated performance criteria for degrees across all institutions

Nature of option:

i) institutions collectively to agree and confirm a threshold grade (currently 30-45% or grade equivalent);

ii) institutions/programme providers to identify, with subject/professional groups where appropriate, minimum (positive) performance criteria for the award of a degree;

iii) external examiners to verify the appropriateness of the threshold and assure comparability of standards within parameters defined by institutions.

Indicative timescale: short term for i); medium to long term for ii) and iii).

18 THRESHOLD STANDARD FOR HONOURS DEGREES

Purpose: to establish, on the basis of current notions of satisfactory performance, a minimum threshold of performance for the attainment of *honours* degrees (ie, confirming a pass for honours).

Nature of option:

i) institutions to discuss and agree the principle collectively;

ii) institutions/programme providers to identify, with subject/professional groups where appropriate, minimum (positive) performance criteria for the award of honours (eg, based on criteria associated with the award of current second class honours);

iii) external examiners to verify the appropriateness of the threshold and assure comparability of standards within parameters defined by institutions.

Indicative timescale: short term for i); medium to long term for ii) and iii).

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THRESHOLD STANDARDS

19 REVIEW THE USE OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE TESTS

Purpose: to provide **a different approach**, review the use of independent tests, designed and administered by independent (international) test agents which, over time, might establish benchmark levels of graduate performance in 'general intellectual and key skills' (see paragraph 5.6.21) prior to entry to postgraduate study or employment. (Such tests might resemble or be developed from existing tests such as GRE or GMAT which are widely used in the USA and in parts of Europe.)

Nature of option: HEQC/QAAHE to review, in partnership with institutions, existing international practice in graduate tests.

Indicative timescale: medium to long term.

SECTION 4

THE RESULTS OF THE CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT GSP REPORT AND PROGRESS ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS SO FAR

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 As part of the developmental approach of the GSP, consultation was sought on the Draft Report and its recommendations and options. Elements of the draft report were subject to two overlapping consultations:

- a consultation by the representative bodies (COSHEP, CVCP and SCOP) of their member institutions on the draft report's recommendations for collective action by higher education institutions;
- a wide-ranging consultation by HEQC (categories of recipients listed in Annex D) on the draft report as a whole and all its recommendations and options (not simply those requiring collective action).

1.2 These consultations yielded 142 written responses: 88 from higher education institutions; 39 from professional and statutory bodies (PSBs), subject associations (SAs) and other organisations; and 15 responses from individuals. A list of all respondents can be found in Annex E.

1.3 The responses to the draft report were analysed with a view to informing the progress of the GSP and the writing of the final report. Respondents generally commended the way in which the GSP had been conducted, and how the draft report in particular had served to stimulate debate, and had provided support for institutions' own work on academic standards.

1.4 Although not all responses dealt with every recommendation and option, the vast majority referred specifically to some of them. The responses were analysed by recommendation and option to gauge support. The analysis is divided into responses by HEIs, and those by others (PSBs, SAs, individuals and miscellaneous). The matter of how much the recommendations would cost to implement, both in terms of financial costs and staff time, was a major theme of many responses, as was the question of institutional autonomy. It has thus been decided to deal with the collective views of respondents on these issues first.

1.5 **Resources and staff time.** These matters were of great concern to the majority of respondents. Many feared that implementation would be prohibitively expensive and involve considerable amounts of work in addition to the requirements of other external overviews (eg, TQA, RAE, audit). At this point a few institutional respondents rejected the feasibility of implementation, while most called for additional funds. Some SAs asserted that they did not currently possess sufficient infrastructure to carry forward some aspects of the report.

1.6 **Autonomy.** While no respondent saw the recommendations as an attempt to deprive institutions of their autonomy, a significant number were anxious that some recommendations appeared to lean in that direction. There was a strong feeling from the responses that the academic community should retain control over standards through the strengthening of existing procedures (external examining and internal review), and that any national steer should be limited to the production of guidelines. Some respondents feared that innovation, valuable diversity and responsiveness to local needs would otherwise be threatened.

1.7 **Comment.** It is perhaps worth restating that HEQC is concerned to respect institutional autonomy and has no desire to see a national curriculum or assessment regime for higher education. However, HEQC does seek collective as well as individual responsibility for academic standards

in order to retain control within the sector. HEQC recognises the current resource constraints on the sector. Please refer to Volume 1 of this final report (and Section 5 of this volume) for details of how it has been recommended that the GSP be put into effect and suggestions as to how the potential burden on resources might be eased.

1.8 **Progress so far.** In addition, this Section 4 includes a brief overview of work relating to standards taking place in the higher education sector today. There has been no attempt to gain a comprehensive picture; rather the aim is to show that many higher education institutions and external constituents are taking the issue of standards seriously and see progress as vital to the successful future of the sector. Each recommendation and option listed below has information about the responses made by the higher education sector to the draft GSP report and a brief overview of progress so far. The recommendations and options are followed by examples of other work relating to standards in higher education (see paragraph 2.2 below).

2 RESPONSES TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPTIONS

2.1 Respondents made detailed comments on all aspects of the draft report, but for reasons of space and clarity only an overview can be provided here.

RECOMMENDATION 1
Institutional explicitness about standards

Institutions/academic units to make explicit and publicly accessible the standards of attainment associated with different programmes and awards.

Institutional responses. Fifty three institutions responded directly to this recommendation. It was perhaps the best supported of all 19 recommendations in the draft report. No institution argued that it should not make its standards of attainment more explicit. Some saw the recommendation as assisting in the reduction of external assessment, thus allowing for a commensurate transfer of resources. It was seen by many as an important step towards the wider implementation of credit systems.

Other responses. This recommendation was strongly supported by PSBs, SAs, individuals and others.

Comment. It now appears that at least the principle of greater explicitness about academic standards is generally accepted within UK higher education, perhaps particularly since it is no longer acceptable to assume that all higher education stakeholders are clear about the standards of attainment associated with different programmes and awards. This perhaps would not have been the case ten years ago.

Progress so far. In their responses to the draft GSP report, a number of HEIs pointed to the considerable progress they had made in making the standards of their own awards more explicit by, for example, moving towards a learning outcome based model. Involvement with one of the regional credit consortia was often cited as a motivating factor. HEQC is aware of some PSBs that have encouraged like institutions to specify clear educational goals for professional courses.

HEQC has brought together a group of 30 higher education institutions to consider the issue of greater explicitness about academic standards. The group represents a mixture of pre- and post-1992 universities and higher education colleges. It has been agreed that members will explore the feasibility in their institution of at least one of the following: 'graduateness', the Graduate Attributes Profile (GAP – see Annex C), the 'degree dimensions' (see Annex C), student transcripts and programme profiling. For example, it was suggested that the GAP might prove a useful tool for staff preparing for TQA, as some HEIs had already found. Some HEIs in this group are already actively engaged in trialing one or more of the above. Others are attending primarily in order to gain new insights into this area of standards work. The group will meet periodically (see 4.5.8 in Annex B for further details).

RECOMMENDATION 2

Range of degree dimensions (formerly 'degree expectations')

HEQC/QAAHE to confirm, in consultation with institutions, a range of generalised dimensions for degrees which would describe the range of attributes that are already embedded in current programmes and awards and/or are now sought by students, professional and statutory bodies, employers etc. Confirmation of an agreed range of dimensions would act as a framework for institutions/academic units to describe and profile the particular characteristics of their programmes.

Institutional responses. A significant majority of the 44 institutions which responded directly to this recommendation supported it. However, judging from the tone of some responses, there were indications that some misinterpreted the recommendation as being prescriptive rather than descriptive. For this reason, the 'degree expectations' have been renamed 'degree dimensions'. It is important to stress that this list was proposed as a *framework* against which institutions could position their programmes, and thus aid a better understanding of current diversity, rather than as a checklist or specification.

There was debate over whether the attributes listed in Annex G of the draft report were too general to contribute meaningfully, and that the framework would have to be narrowed to the level of groups of courses or subject areas. The view was expressed that this recommendation would be assisted if greater explicitness of standards (see recommendation 1) could be achieved.

Other responses. Similar concerns about the perceived over-prescriptive nature of the recommendation were voiced by the PSBs. SAs appeared slightly more supportive, although Annex G in the draft report was thought by some to be too generalised and needed to be made subject specific. Elsewhere it was observed that the assessment of some attributes/skills was problematic.

Comment. The attempt at defining a framework, within which attributes associated with particular programmes could be located, was generally seen as potentially useful and an excellent stimulus for debate, but requiring some additional work before it could be realistically applied throughout the higher education sector.

Progress so far. Aside from its own facilitating work (see recommendation 1 above), the Council is aware of a number of HEIs and other bodies (for example, SAs and PSBs) active in this area. Some have developed definitions of graduateness, both subject-specific and institution-wide. Others have produced templates or more extensive guidelines for Key Skills considered appropriate for all their students to acquire, with varying attempts to articulate levels and standards. Such developments have necessitated changes to teaching and learning strategies and assessment methods. There is an Ability-Based Curriculum Network (consisting of representatives of a number of pre- and post-1992 universities) that is exploring how Key Skills can best be integrated into mainstream curricula and how they might be assessed.

One HEI found the Graduate Attributes Profile (GAP) to include elements not in their own existing model, which it is now reviewing. Another HEI is considering ways of involving employers in the assessment of Key Skills. Some PSBs have put forward a curriculum framework for all programmes that lead to entry into their profession. These set out the learning outcomes that students need to have achieved upon graduation in order to work as competent practitioners. One SA is reported to be undertaking similar work to counter concerns about variable standards during a period of rapid subject expansion. One PSB reported that it had conducted a small-scale survey on the GAP and found a fair measure of consensus among heads of departments as to the priorities that should be given to the attributes listed.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Descriptive awards framework

HEQC/QAAHE to develop, in partnership with institutions and their representative bodies, a descriptive awards framework that provides a rationale for different types of awards and clarifies

the relationship between awards at different levels. In due course this could be linked to credits. This parallels the recommendation made in the Harris Report for postgraduate awards.

Institutional responses. Most of the 51 institutions that responded to this recommendation were strongly supportive. Very few institutions argued that there was no confusion about the nomenclature of awards. Most pointed to the use of terms such as 'diploma' and 'certificate' as sources of confusion, as well as the increasing usage of undergraduate 'master's' degrees in some subject areas.

Many saw the potential benefits of an awards framework for students, institutions and employers, and hoped that it would eventually be linked with a consistent form of transcript. Others, while supporting the recommendation, had concerns over its implementation (eg, convincing all of the relevant bodies to agree to the framework) and its effect on the standing of UK degrees overseas.

Other responses. PSBs and SAs were also in agreement with the recommendation. It was stated that, within the framework, attempts should be made to indicate clearly the level of the qualification, and that the framework should be applied consistently across the higher education sector. It was also hoped that any framework would not constrain legitimate diversity.

Comment. There was widespread recognition among respondents that while recent diversification of awards was welcome, the lack of an awards framework was causing unacceptable confusion among stakeholders.

Progress so far. HEQC has knowledge of a small number of HEIs that have constructed (or are moving towards) their own internal awards frameworks. This was done better to inform students, parents and employers by improving clarity about the level and purpose of awards. The levels descriptors and credit work undertaken by the various credit consortia (HECIW, SEEC, NICAT, NUCCAT and SCOTCAT) have also been useful in helping to define particular awards. (See also section 4.1.2 in Annex B for an account of the survey of awards undertaken by HEQC as part of the GSP.)

RECOMMENDATION 4

Typology/profiling of programmes

HEQC/QAAHE to develop and pilot, in partnership with institutions and other relevant groups (eg, subject associations, professional and statutory bodies), a typological framework within which to describe and locate different types of programmes associated with different educational purposes and standards.

Institutional responses. Most of the 42 responses to this recommendation were supportive. It was thought by many to be essential for this work to link to work on credit frameworks. Some thought that it would function best at a subject level, and agreed that employers, students, PSBs and SAs should be involved in the developmental phases. There was some concern, however, even amongst those who supported the recommendation, that it had the potential to threaten diversity and innovation. Thus, some respondents emphasised that the framework must be for guidance rather than prescription.

Other responses. There was broad support for the recommendation from the PSBs and SAs. Some PSBs argued for a typological framework that described entry requirements, types of courses and outcomes in terms of competences. It was also thought important that any typological framework should articulate with the development of an awards framework. The only concerns were that a nationally agreed framework might be difficult to achieve and that any typology must be applied across the entire higher education sector.

Comment. There was broad recognition that the current diversity of provision inhibited understanding at the programme level, and that a typological framework would assist in providing clarification.

Progress so far. The response from one HEI to the draft GSP report outlined how the institution

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Comment. There was broad recognition that the current diversity of provision inhibited understanding at the programme level, and that a typological framework would assist in providing clarification.

Progress so far. The response from one HEI to the draft GSP report outlined how the institution

had enhanced programme profiling by requiring all programmes to set out clearly such matters as aims, objectives, outcomes, modes of assessment, criteria for assessment, curricula, form of delivery, duration and level. One SA cited information that it routinely collects as the basis for possible subject-wide non-prescriptive programme profiling. Another SA is developing a typology of existing courses, with definitions of the outcomes these courses seek to achieve for students. It was concluded that it should be feasible to replicate this work in other subject areas. (See also 4.1.6 in Annex B describing the development by HEQC of two programme profiling tools, one to enable programme providers to better describe the features of their programmes, and the other to improve the information available to potential students and employers. See also Annex C, part 3) for an interim report on the development of a tool to enable providers to profile their academic programmes, including an exemplar of such a profile.)

HEQC is represented on the steering committee of the UCAS Tariff and Profile Project which is considering ways to establish equivalencies and give numerical values to pre-higher education qualifications. This would have implications for higher education work on levels, standards and access. It is also looking at ways to enhance links between student profiles, such as records of achievement, and higher education course profiles. This would have implications for work which attempts to increase explicitness about standards, work on degree dimensions and student transcripts, as well as programme profiling.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Transcripts

HEQC/QAAHE to review current approaches to student transcripts in partnership with institutions, and to consult on the adoption of a consistent form of transcript across institutions.

Institutional responses. There was almost universal support from the 43 institutions that responded to this recommendation. While it was recognised that there was as yet no common understanding of what information a transcript should include, transcripts were seen as a means of providing much needed additional information on courses and students in the context of increasingly prevalent modularisation and credit accumulation and transfer. Some respondents envisaged a transcript as a useful complement to the classified honours system, while others argued that the former should replace the latter.

Some respondents stressed that while a national core transcript was appropriate, institutions should be free to develop around this their own systems for recording attainment. It was also emphasised that employers would need to contribute to any new system.

Other responses. It was felt by many PSBs and SAs that a clear and consistent national system of transcripts would make student competences more explicit and thus give employers more confidence in the awards made by institutions. It was also argued that a mature transcript system could remove the need for the classified honours system. Elsewhere it was noted that any national developments should build on existing best practice in institutions.

Comment. The introduction of some form of national transcript has the potential greatly to improve the articulation of standards, and thus to reduce the need for other measures, such as threshold standards (see recommendations 14–19).

Progress so far. HEQC has received information about many HEIs that have developed their own transcript system. This form of recording attainment has improved clarity concerning student achievement for all stakeholders. Transcripts have been particularly useful in drawing out the key transferable skills students gain while in higher education. It should be noted that many HEIs belong to credit consortia that are developing transcript systems on a regional basis, with a view, through the Inter-Credit Consortia Agreement, to extending this nationally. Work in schools on records of achievement has also provided an impetus. Current work funded by the DfEE will take the development of transcripts and records of achievement in higher education even further. (See

4.5.11 in Annex B for details of HEQC work on mapping current practice in the area of recording student attainment. This work aims to assist with the development of a consistent national format.)

RECOMMENDATION 6

Standards in programme design/approval processes

There are three stages to this recommendation. The first relates to institutions, individually, in the short term. The second is a strengthened version of the first and would apply to all institutions only in the medium term since it is dependent on support for other recommendations in this report. The third is for consideration across self-selecting groups of institutions within their own time-scale.

> ***i) Institutions, individually, to review their processes for the design and approval/validation of programmes/programme elements to ensure that full consideration is given to standards matters (eg, the nature and appropriateness of the standards set, the means of testing them through assessment, 'degree dimensions' (formerly 'expectations'), and the standards of performance required at the threshold level).***
>
> ***ii) Institutions, collectively, to agree and adopt a set of elements that should be considered and checked within programme design and programme approval/validation processes. These would be produced as guidelines to institutions by a new QA agency, in partnership with institutions, and would subsequently be tested in external quality assurance arrangements.***
>
> ***iii) Two or more self-selecting institutions to develop a collective approach to programme approval/validation through a shared external verification process. Professional body accreditation in the UK provides one model; other examples can be seen in international quality assurance arrangements.***

Institutional responses. There was broad support for this recommendation. Many respondents were worried that a sector-wide approach might involve the imposition of uniformity, and concern was also expressed that developments by groups of self-selecting institutions (stage iii) might lead to the formation of self-satisfied cliques. Many respondents believed that all institutions should now be at stage i). Generally speaking, the preferred way forward was for QAAHE to issue guidance on these matters to inform (and later test) autonomous institutional practice (stage ii).

Suggestions on additional measures were various. For example, the revival of aspects of the CNAA-model was suggested, as was the creation of a national pool of external assessors/validators for HEIs to draw upon.

Other responses. The little feedback on this recommendation received from PSBs, SAs and others reflected the above comments.

Comment. There was strong support for strengthening programme design/approval processes as a means of clearly embedding standards in programmes from their inception. Respondents generally accepted the need for national guidelines but wished to champion what they perceived to be legitimate programme diversity and thus avoid uniformity.

Progress so far. A few responses (from both HEIs and PSBs) cited their existing systems of programme approval/validation as meeting most of the requirements of this recommendation, and a number of others commented that they were undertaking development work in this area. One HEI noted that its move towards the integration of Key Skills into the mainstream curriculum had led to a review of the programme design/validation process. A number of responses from the area of non-medical health care education and training noted that this recommendation was reflected in the rationale of the new quality assurance system proposed for that field (see HEQC/NHS, 1996). One PSB submitted details of its own robust validation objectives. Another reported that it was considering

ways of better ensuring the security of standards by enhancing the role externals play in accredited courses – for example, through the joint development of syllabuses and joint delivery and assessment. HEQC has itself begun to investigate how programme design/approval processes might improve the security and comparability of academic standards (see Annex B 4.1.6 and Annex C).

RECOMMENDATION 7

Training/development for internal assessors/examiners

Institutions, supported as necessary by external agencies, to provide training, induction, guidance and development opportunities to equip all staff who assess student performance with the appropriate range of skills for this task. Such training/development provides an important basis for the development of judgements about standards.

Institutional responses. Twenty-four institutions responded directly to this recommendation and were generally supportive. The modification of existing staff development processes (in order to minimise additional administrative and financial costs) was seen as the most efficient way to take this recommendation forward. It was stated that while training for new staff might be acceptable, any professional development programme intended for existing staff (who might have many years of assessment experience) would have to be very sensitively presented.

Other responses. This recommendation was not discussed by PSBs or SAs. Elsewhere it was noted that this recommendation provided an opportunity for assessors to consider how best to assess Key Skills.

Comment. Although only a relatively small number of responses were obtained, the need for assessors to be overtly trained was clearly recognised as necessary in a diverse, mass and rapidly changing higher education system.

Progress so far. A number of HEIs pointed to the fact that they already had clear and published assessment criteria. HEQC is aware of one HEI that trains all its internal assessors, endeavours to offer an overview of all assessment carried out in the institution and welcomes national guidance from HEQC and others (eg, the Silver report, QSC/OU, 1995). Another HEI undertakes significant work on training its assessors to ensure they possess the appropriate assessment skills, and HEQC is aware of further HEIs that operate department-based training exercises. One PSB has commissioned a research project to investigate the assessment practices of all HEIs where their subject is taught, with a view to ensuring that all examples are acceptable and of a broadly similar standard. One HEI conducted a similar investigation and found considerable differences in practice. (See 4.7.2 in Annex B for details concerning HEQC work on the implications of the recommendations of the GSP for student assessment.)

HEQC is aware of further related work which has looked at mapping the range of assessment strategies and practice across universities, colleges and institutes of higher education. This has been done in Scotland, for example, by Assessment Strategies in Scottish Higher Education (ASSHE), where the focus has been to spotlight the rich diversity of assessment practice, as well as identifying 'core' themes which characterise the nature of development work. The dissemination of current practice is important for all higher education staff involved in the assessment process, especially where these processes are undergoing change, with the potential benefits including the development of judgements about standards.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Examiners' fora

Institutions to provide regular and timetabled opportunities for internal examiners to meet (separate from examination boards) to review assessment practice and to share perspectives on academic standards. This might be extended to include external examiners and examiners from other institutions and is important for the strengthening of peer judgement.

Institutional responses. Twenty-four institutions responded directly to this recommendation and nearly all were supportive. Some respondents said that such fora already existed in some areas and that any national guidelines should build on best practice. The inclusion of external examiners was perceived by some to be prohibitively expensive.

Other responses. This recommendation was not discussed by PSBs or SAs. Elsewhere, as similarly stated under recommendation 7, it was noted that such fora provide an opportunity for assessors to improve their ability to assess Key Skills.

Comment. As commented under recommendation 7 above, the transformation of UK higher education from an elite to a mass system and from homogeneity to diversity, lends weight to the charge that informal socialisation into the academic community is not sufficient, in terms of assessment practice, to ensure the security of academic standards.

Progress so far. A number of disciplines, through EHE Discipline Network funding, have established electronic fora for the dissemination of teaching, learning and assessment issues. On a smaller scale, the meetings of members of Discipline Networks were found to provide a unique opportunity for the exchange of ideas. Two HEIs have informed HEQC that they already convene fora for their internal examiners. A small number of PSBs are known to be involved in the convening of conferences, seminars and workshops (targeted at tutors, accreditors, external examiners and department heads). These focus on sharing perspectives on academic standards.

RECOMMENDATION 9

External examiners

Institutions to adopt and implement the framework for external examining published by QSC/OU (Silver report, 1995) and the recently published guidelines to support effective external examining practice (HEQC, 1996h). Institutional action and approaches would then be reviewed in external quality assurance arrangements. Subjects/professional groups may also wish to provide opportunities for external examiners to meet to discuss standards.

Institutional responses. Of the 49 responses to this recommendation, most welcomed the HEQC guidelines but stressed that these should not be interpreted in prescriptive terms. The point was made that external examiners were already over-stretched and recruitment was often difficult. There was a clear difference of opinion over whether external examiners should be drawn from similar institutions (to ensure better understanding of what was expected) or whether such practices would encourage self-satisfied cliques and thus undermine the greater security and comparability of standards desired.

Other responses. Strengthening of external examining received strong support from the PSBs and SAs. The PSBs tended to concur with the view that external examiners were less effective if only drawn from perceived peer institutions. Some respondents saw the advantage of SAs maintaining registers of approved external examiners in their subject area. Elsewhere, as similarly stated under recommendations 7 and 8, it was noted that part of the strengthening of external examining must involve discussion of how the assessment of Key Skills might be improved.

Comment. Most respondents were of the opinion that while external examining had long been central to the security of standards, it was no longer possible to leave the system unreformed or rely on it so heavily.

Progress so far. Responses to the draft GSP report revealed work among some HEIs to review their own arrangements for external examining or introduce induction and training programmes for new external examiners (often based upon HEQC guidance). Some already have handbooks or codes of practice for external examiners. In addition, it was noted that one SA had established a register of staff who are eligible and willing to serve as external examiners, another two had run conferences for external examiners for a number of years and a PSB had produced a manual for

external examiners. On the other hand, a number of institutions commented on the robustness of their existing arrangements. The Ability-Based Curriculum Network (see recommendation 2) submitted a discussion document to HEQC raising questions on how the external examiner system might best take account of Key Skills. One PSB is considering utilising a number of existing groups (representing sub-disciplines) as fora for external examiners to share good practice. Other PSBs already provide opportunities for external examiners to meet in order to undertake induction programmes and annual updating. A national awarding body has for some time produced a handbook for its external examiners.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Alignment of assessment conventions/bench-marking of practice

Two approaches are proposed:

> *i) Bench-marking assessment regulations and protocols:*
> *two or more self-selecting groups of institutions to compare and agree some common conventions on assessment regulations in order to improve the bases for comparability of standards. Some institutions are already engaged in such activity.*
>
> *ii) Bench-marking assessment practice and outcomes:*
> *two or more institutions offering comparable programmes/awards to engage (on a self-selecting basis) in periodic joint review of their standard-setting and assessment practice (at subject/programme levels) in order to improve the bases for comparability of standards.*

Institutional responses. Three-quarters of the 24 institutions that responded to this recommendation were in support. Suggestions for ways forward included the standardisation of the length of formal examinations and of resit opportunities (but not the forms or weighting of assessment), inter-institutional delivery and validation of programmes and bench-marking on a regional or subject basis. Opposition to the recommendation was based on factors such as the danger of encouraging 'cosiness' between self-selecting institutions, the view that contemporary higher education is too diverse to admit of useful internal comparisons and that bench-marking would inhibit legitimate diversity.

Other responses. This recommendation was seen by some PSBs to have potential, while some SAs echoed institutional concerns about the formation of self-satisfied cliques and constraints upon diversity.

Comment. This recommendation goes further than most in proposing a way to compare directly the means by which the standards of some institutions are set. As many of the responses revealed, it opens up questions concerning how far this is desirable or feasible since it would involve, to some extent, constraining diversity in the cause of comparability.

Progress so far. HEQC is supporting a number of collaborative bench-marking projects. These include the bench-marking of institutional assessment processes (including regulatory frameworks) by six universities; the bench-marking of assessment practice at institutional and departmental level by six other universities and a project sponsored by a PSB to bench-mark assessment practice at the departmental level among six engineering departments. In addition, work by a regional credit consortium is underway to bench-mark regulations and practice relating to institutional credit arrangements. A bench-marking forum has been set to facilitate the exchange of best practice between these projects. HEQC has also advised the Commonwealth Centre for Higher Education Management Services (CHEMS) on the development of a bench-marking instrument for higher education based on the European Quality Model for industry.

RECOMMENDATION 11

Development and use of archives/data information to evaluate standards

> *i) At national level, relevant agencies (eg, HESA, new QA agency) to provide information and data (including international data) to assist in the monitoring, comparison, evaluation and improvement of standards over time.*

ii) Institutions to develop and maintain representative archives of assessment instruments, marks and grades, student responses to them, examiners' comments and reports as a basis for internal research and evaluation of standards and aspects of academic practice.

Institutional responses. Nearly all of the 26 respondents to this recommendation supported the proposals. However, there was debate as to whether it was cost-effective to have HESA, as well as institutions, collect data, and how best to ensure that HEIs gathered useful and comparable data to enable sensible comparisons to be made; for example, to take account of changes in the nature of a subject over time. Use of the Internet as a place of storage was thought a possibility. Concerns about the potential for excessive bureaucracy were also aired.

Other responses. The few responses that dealt with this recommendation were generally opposed to it on the grounds of HESA/HEI duplication, excessive bureaucracy and the strain on resources.

Comment. Although no response denied the usefulness of access to such data to evaluate standards and standards setting/monitoring processes over time, the issues of administration and resources were viewed as significant stumbling blocks.

Progress so far. Out of all the recommendations of the draft report, part ii) of recommendation 11 is perhaps the least well-developed across the higher education sector as a whole. The vast majority of institutions, as noted in many responses to the draft GSP report, have been dissuaded from such activity by the resource and administrative burden perceived to be involved. However, HEQC is aware of one HEI which has operated a central information system for well over a decade. This work was assisted by the fact that the institution had long been modular, had a centralised administration and assessment system, and all modules used the same grading system. This meant that all information collected was easily comparable. The archive material has been used to study the effect of such things as class size, student learning hours and assessment pattern (eg, proportion of course work) on student performance. An awareness of the benefits gained from the storage of this data has lead a few other HEIs to undertake similar work.

A small number of subject-based groups, through the EHE Discipline Network scheme, have established archives of teaching and learning strategies and materials. One response to the draft GSP report revealed that the HEI concerned was considering the creation of an archive for the storage of examination scripts to allow an overview of standards over time.

RECOMMENDATION 12

Structures/opportunities to identify and review standards

Subject/professional groups to develop or extend mechanisms for articulating and underpinning standards, in partnership with institutions, and with a new QA agency where appropriate (eg, maintaining 'expert' panels for validation/accreditation/external examining/assessing; directories of programmes/programme elements in field; relevant programme/award/progression statistics; mechanisms for monitoring changes to standards at other educational or occupational levels, and internationally; formal opportunities to discuss, articulate and review standards).

Institutional responses. Only 18 responses dealt with this recommendation, of which most were supportive. There was particular support for a developmental rather than inspectorial emphasis. Those opposed pointed to the mechanisms for the control of standards already in place (eg, TQA, RAE and quality audit) as being sufficient.

Other responses. The few responses to this recommendation from PSBs and SAs reflected the mixture of support and opposition outlined above. Elsewhere it was suggested that the UK might follow the example of engineering practice in the USA, where examinations for professional engineers, which are taken a number of years after graduation, include questions from a variety of engineering faculties with a view to better ensuring comparability.

Comment. The recommendation was far more open-ended than the others and thus requires further development work and consultation to arrive at a clear way forward.

Progress so far. HEQC is aware of one HEI that encourages a retrospective investigation of standards as part of its departmental review process. A number of SAs are beginning to respond to the agenda addressed by the GSP in their work. Some SAs are undertaking curriculum mapping exercises; and others are beginning to gather statistics which are relevant for the identification and reviewing of standards. One SA is beginning to look at the standards issue from an international perspective. Another has instigated an annual conference for external examiners to facilitate discussion of the role of externals, with an emphasis on the development of that role. The DfEE-funded EHE Discipline Networks have also provided opportunities for subject representatives to gain a better overview of practice within a particular discipline. For example, one network has produced a compendium of innovative teaching methods and best practice.

OPTION 13

Separation of assessment from programme delivery

Two approaches are suggested as a means of increasing independence/objectivity in the assessment process:

> ***i) Within one institution, or a group of self-selecting institutions, separate summative assessment from teaching by having a group of examiners appointed on a rotating/fixed term basis. Some institutions already adopt this practice.***
>
> ***ii) Within a programme of study, concentrate on some or all elements being separately assessed.***

Institutional responses. Nearly all of the 43 responses to this option were opposed to it. The main concerns were that it would undermine institutional autonomy, lead to a national curriculum and eliminate valuable feedback to teachers gained through the assessment of their own students. Internal double and blind marking was considered a far more desirable method of increasing the objectivity of assessment. Others commented that implementation of some of the other recommendations of the GSP would remove the need for option 13.

The few supporters of this option foresaw difficulties in institutions attracting sufficient quality examiners.

Other responses. This option was not discussed by PSBs or SAs. Elsewhere it was argued that the benefits of objectivity intended by this option might be gained without the costs if samples of internally assessed work were submitted to common external scrutiny.

Comment. The separation of the assessment from delivery of programmes was put forward as an option rather than a recommendation because of the potential difficulties involved. The sector clearly shared these misgivings, seeing any increase in objectivity as outweighed by losses elsewhere. This was the least well supported of all 19 recommendations and options.

Progress so far. This option was not favoured by the higher education sector or its external constituencies. It is not proposed that it should be taken forward under the GSP. However, it is interesting to note that such a system has long been practised by a small number of UK universities.

OPTION 14

Review classification system and place of honours degree

> ***i) Moving to a threshold approach to academic standards raises at least two questions about the honours degree and classification system: first, the relationship between honours and non-honours degrees; and second, the continuing utility of the present approach to grading and classifying student performance within the honours classification system.***

ii) HEQC/QAAHE, in partnership with institutions, to undertake a survey of relevant internal and external stakeholders and international experience to review the place of honours degrees within undergraduate awards and the development of a classification system to meet contemporary needs.

Institutional responses. Approximately three-quarters of the 45 respondents to this option supported it. Aside from the question of threshold standards, a significant number saw the review as the first step in the eventual phasing out of the system and championed transcripts as the way forward. However, others considered the classified honours system (CHS) as inappropriate for only some programmes and recommended that transcripts be used to complement what was a well-respected system. Regarding the possible introduction of threshold standards, some respondents feared that a non-honours degree would not be popular with students or employers and would have poor currency abroad, while others pointed to what they perceived as the success of the Scottish higher education system in this respect.

Other responses. Some PSBs were little concerned with the CHS, given that many operate an additional threshold system to grant a license to practice. Most PSBs were of the view that current classifications did not offer sufficient guidance as to a student's abilities, but were divided over whether the CHS should thus be abolished and replaced with a national transcript system or simply rendered more explicit – for example, setting out in more detail what an upper second means. It was also stressed that employers might not wish to abandon the CHS as a simple selection system.

SAs showed a similar pattern of support and caution. Elsewhere it was argued that the removal of third class honours might, if instituted along with other GSP recommendations, create more confidence in the CHS. However, this went against the view of one PSB which asserted that it did not regard third class honours graduates as effective failures.

Comment. Overall, the responses suggest that a review of the CHS is timely, but that serious consideration needs to be given to the question of abolition *versus* reform.

Progress so far. There is much evidence that many universities have, through the use of transcripts and, in some cases, through the development of distinct local awards, concluded that at the very least the classified honours system is in need of supplementation. One higher education, in partnership with employers, has developed a number of work-based learning degrees. These do not use traditional methods of classification and are based upon a criterion-referenced credit system leading to a student transcript. Another HEI has held discussions within its teaching committee on this issue, where there was considerable support for the replacement of current classifications with transcripts based on grade point averages. There is a feeling, however, that a national approach is required to take this forward. The Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) (consisting of representatives from a number of post-1992 universities) has already undertaken a review of the current system and alternatives for classifying degrees. One finding was that modularity and the classified degree did not sit well together.

OPTION 15

Local thresholds

Two linked approaches are proposed:

i) Each institution to develop its own minimum performance criteria for the awards of a diploma/degree in terms of the knowledge, skills, understanding and other attributes expected of its graduates. These would be informed by any agreed collective dimensions of degrees, as well as work on 'graduateness' and relevant international standards.

ii) Subject-based networks to develop and agree guidance on minimum or key requirements for their field or sub-field. These would be informed by any collective expectations (now dimensions) of degrees, as well as work on 'graduateness' and relevant international standards, and would inform institutional standards at module/programme levels.

Institutional responses. Approximately two-thirds of the 27 responses to this option were supportive. Some mentioned that work was already being developed within their institution. However, opinion was divided over whether thresholds would work best at the institutional or subject level. Others thought sector-wide thresholds the only means of enhancing comparability, while some doubted that it would be possible to generate meaningful thresholds in any context amid current diversity.

Other responses. Among PSBs and SAs, the few responses made indicated no support for institutional thresholds but some for thresholds at the subject level.

Comment. Only modest support was obtained for this option, and more for part i).

Progress so far. While the development of sector-wide threshold standards was judged by HEQC to be at present undesirable and not feasible, local thresholds (ie, at the institutional or subject level) were considered more appropriate. The responses to the draft GSP report broadly supported this view. HEQC is, however, aware of little work in the sector specifically devoted to such tasks.

OPTION 16

'Progression' threshold

HEQC/single-agency to pilot, in partnership with institutions, a threshold standard for progression from non-honours to honours-level study: one example is provided by the Scottish system. Students might initially be accepted only on to 'first level' study, an approach that would mirror practice in relation to registration for doctorates.

Institutional responses. The 28 responses to this option were split evenly between support and opposition. A number of Scottish HEIs championed their own use of progression thresholds. Those in support liked the idea of clearer minimum standards of achievement being required for progression but there appeared to be some confusion over exactly how a progression threshold system would operate and this undermined support. For example, the lessons of the Scottish system were not obvious to one respondent. A national progression threshold, some respondents commented, would only be feasible if a consensus emerged on a generic view of graduateness. The question was also asked whether the practice of the accreditation of prior learning, and thus multiple entry points, was compatible with the introduction of a progression threshold.

Other responses. There was little support from the small number of responses to this recommendation obtained from SAs and PSBs. Elsewhere, the Scottish system was commended.

Comment. This option elicited no overall support and the responses demonstrated the need for clarification on how such a system might operate.

Progress so far. This recommendation received a very mixed response from the higher education sector. It is generally agreed that progress on the recommendations relating to greater clarity and security of standards is needed before thresholds can feasibly be developed. However, it is important to note that a number of Scottish universities operate a progression threshold system between non-honours and honours and view this as a significant means of assuring standards.

OPTIONS 17 AND 18

Threshold standards for non-honours degrees and threshold standards for honours degrees

Institutions, individually and collectively, to agree a threshold grade, with associated performance criteria for the award of a (non-honours) degree.

Institutions, individually and collectively, to identify and agree a threshold standard (ie, minimum performance criteria) for the attainment of an honours degree (eg, based on criteria associated with the award of current second class honours).

Institutional responses. Slightly more than half of the 29 responses to these options were in support. However, there was no consensus on where to place any thresholds for honours and non-honours

degrees. There was some concern that national thresholds of this kind would lower the standards in some institutions. It was thought that the inevitable diversity of standards in a mass higher education system, and thus the impossibility of sensible national thresholds, should be recognised. Non-honours degrees, some respondents thought, would never gain sufficient currency among students and employers. It was argued that modularisation now meant that standards work should be at the level of the module rather than the degree as a whole.

Other responses. The little comment from PSBs and SAs on this option was broadly supportive. Elsewhere the Scottish system was commended.

Comment. Apart from option 14, which proposed a review of the classified honours system, and to a lesser extent option 15 which proposed the introduction of local thresholds, the options dealing with threshold standards did not command significant support. This appeared to be due to the considerable technical difficulties involved.

Progress so far. These recommendations were generally not well received by respondents to the draft report. As with 'progression thresholds', prior attainment of greater clarity and security of standards is needed before thresholds can be developed. (See option 16 for a note on the Scottish situation on threshold standards.)

OPTION 19

Review the use of international graduate tests

HEQC/new agency to review the use of independent tests to assess 'general intellectual and key skills' prior to entry to postgraduate study or employment, particularly drawing on international experience. (Such tests might resemble or be developed from existing tests such as a GRE/GMAT which are widely used in the USA.) Over time, the results of such tests might establish bench-marks for attainment in general skills.

Institutional responses. The majority of institutional responses to this option opposed it on the grounds that it would inhibit diversity and encourage teaching to the test. In any case, few national or subject bench-marks currently exist as a basis for setting any tests. There was some support for a review of how these tests might be used to assist, as part of larger assessment and selection systems, in standards work in higher education.

Other responses. This option was not discussed by PSBs or SAs.

Comment. As was the case with option 13 above (separation of assessment from delivery), the introduction of national graduate tests was not favoured by the GSP Steering Committee and thus was put forward as an option rather than as a recommendation. The sector appeared to concur broadly with this view.

Progress so far. This option was not favoured by the higher education sector or its external constituents. It is not proposed that it should be taken forward under the GSP. However, it is interesting to note that new UK-based graduate employability tests have recently been launched – for example, the Graduate Employability Test (GET) published by Sylvan Prometric, and the Aptitude for Business Learning Exercises (ABLE) published by Oxford Psychologists Press.

2.2 Other work relating to standards

Credit consortia. As noted above, many institutions cited their involvement with regional and national credit consortia as greatly assisting their thinking and practice in respect of credit and academic standards. Credit consortia are voluntary associations of higher education institutions which are at the forefront of development and initiatives on credit. In some cases they have developed credit frameworks for their areas with accompanying guidelines (for example, in Scotland, Wales and SE England). Where followed, such guidelines are an aid to consistent practice and explicitness in identifying the level and the amount of credit allocated to modules and programmes within and

SECTION 5

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS: IMPLICATIONS AND ACTION ARISING FROM THE GSP

1 ASSURING ACADEMIC STANDARDS: A COMMENTARY ON TRANSITION AND CHANGE

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This section of the report considers the relationship of the Graduate Standards Programme to the Council's audit and other quality assurance processes. It also sets out, in broad terms, the implications of the GSP for the wider context of quality assurance. The picture is necessarily broad since three major events are likely to affect the future shape of national arrangements for quality and standards in the UK. The first is the recent establishment (in April, 1997) of a new Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE) (arising from the recommendations in the Joint Planning Group Report, CVCP, 1996), which will take over the functions of HEQC and the quality assessment responsibilities of the higher education funding councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The second is the recent election of a Labour Government in the UK, with an Education Bill promised for July 1997, and the third is the imminent publication of the outcomes of the National Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing. The 'Dearing Committee' has had a remit to consider quality and standards in UK higher education in relation to the future purposes, size and shape of the sector.

1.1.2 As described in Section 1, the GSP has taken place within a context of continuing change. New forms of delivering and facilitating learning are emerging, new collaborative arrangements are developing and the market for higher education services, nationally and internationally, is becoming increasingly competitive. This context, along with the size and cost of higher education (to the taxpayer, the individual, to employers or other sponsors), provides an important backdrop, not only to the findings and recommendations of the GSP, but also to the further development of quality assurance arrangements in UK higher education.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 The assurance of standards in higher education, prior to 1992, relied on a range of interlocking activities involving individual institutions, professional and statutory bodies, academic peers who worked across institutions, professional and international peer networks, contacts with employers and industry, and a more or less formal regulatory framework within which institutions worked collectively. (The polytechnics and colleges operated within the CNAA's formal framework while the universities received CVCP guidance.) This interlocking structure has been defined broadly as self-regulation since it has, in large part, depended on the involvement of academic peers in the relevant evaluative activities, and on the acknowledged autonomy of institutions. Such autonomy, and associated responsibility for quality and standards, was recognised by Government in the 1991 White Paper (*Higher education: a new framework*) and was subsequently confirmed in the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992.

1.2.2 The expansion and diversification of higher education in the last five years has led to the development of new structures and processes within institutions. This has made self-regulation more complicated, not least because old and new systems often co-exist. For example, with the introduction of modular curriculum frameworks, changes are occurring:

- in the nature of the assessment model which underpins the award of a degree;
- in the focus of regulations which control academic practice leading to the award of degrees; such regulations are shifting from being course-based to being institution-wide frameworks;

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1.2 Background

1.2.1 The assurance of standards in higher education, prior to 1992, relied on a range of interlocking activities involving individual institutions, professional and statutory bodies, academic peers who worked across institutions, professional and international peer networks, contacts with employers and industry, and a more or less formal regulatory framework within which institutions worked collectively. (The polytechnics and colleges operated within the CNAA's formal framework while the universities received CVCP guidance.) This interlocking structure has been defined broadly as self-regulation since it has, in large part, depended on the involvement of academic peers in the relevant evaluative activities, and on the acknowledged autonomy of institutions. Such autonomy, and associated responsibility for quality and standards, was recognised by Government in the 1991 White Paper (*Higher education: a new framework*) and was subsequently confirmed in the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992.

1.2.2 The expansion and diversification of higher education in the last five years has led to the development of new structures and processes within institutions. This has made self-regulation more complicated, not least because old and new systems often co-exist. For example, with the introduction of modular curriculum frameworks, changes are occurring:

- in the nature of the assessment model which underpins the award of a degree;
- in the focus of regulations which control academic practice leading to the award of degrees; such regulations are shifting from being course-based to being institution-wide frameworks;

- in the nature and focus of the processes through which academic standards are defined, set, and verified, with increasing emphasis on modules and subjects as the focal point for standards and the final award representing the sum of student attainment in the various components of a programme.

1.2.3 Not only has self-regulation of academic quality and standards changed as a result of internal academic change, external expectations of higher education have also shifted. Changing external expectations are visible in the operation of quality audit, teaching quality assessment, research assessment and professional accreditation/review, as well as in quality assurance models drawn from outside higher education such as BS5750/ISO9000, Total Quality Management, the *Investors in People* standard and the European and British Quality Awards. The influence of other approaches to standards and their assurance, through the frameworks of NCVQ and SCOTVEC (now or soon to be under the QCA and SQA respectively) have also been felt in higher education, and will continue to be. The net effect of internally driven changes in academic practice, wider changes in the size (and costs) of the higher education system and new notions of accountability are causing 'self-regulation' to be redefined. What is emerging might be described as 'collective' or 'integrated' regulation where responsibilities for assurance exist within, across and outside institutions.

1.2.4 Based on the Council's work to date, it is apparent that new forms of regulation emphasise:

- clarity of purpose, objectives and responsibilities within agreed frameworks;
- clarity about desired outcomes and performance standards in the context of objectives and relevant external referents;
- management and evaluation of performance based on evidence which will include internal and external data collection and analysis;
- developmental action to promote change and innovation;
- accountability to relevant third parties (including students, collaborators and partners, accrediting bodies, employers, funding agencies, the wider academic community and society at large).

1.2.5 The evidence, from within the GSP and from the Council's wider work, indicates that individual institutions are expending great effort and resources in developing new quality assurance approaches in response to change, including some new collective frameworks such as those developing within credit consortia. It is also apparent that a new consensus is developing as to what constitutes effective practice in the changed conditions; these approaches are currently represented in the Council's *Guidelines on quality assurance* (HEQC, 1996j) and will be subject to review as conditions change.

1.3 Assuring the effectiveness of institutional self-regulation: the present position

1.3.1 Academic quality audit has, since its inception, been concerned with the ways in which individual institutions maintain the standards of their programmes and associated awards. Since September 1994, the Council's audit teams have been asked to determine :

- how an institution's policy on the academic standards of its programmes is formed, including reference, where appropriate, to its validating/awarding body;
- what that policy is;
- how the policy is implemented;
- how its effectiveness is monitored;
- to what extent it is informed by any attempt to ensure comparability with the awards of other institutions (including those of a validating/awarding body);
- how any comparability is secured.

Audit teams have used a variety of evidence to reach their judgements, including reports from external examiners, the funding councils and professional and statutory bodies.

1.3.2 In 1997, 'continuation audit' is beginning. It includes the 27 institutions that have not been audited under HEQC's auspices, but under the arrangements of the former Academic Audit Unit. These audits are being undertaken in the transitional period leading up to the design of an integrated approach to quality assurance, foreshadowed in the final report of the Joint Planning Group. The information received will help to inform the design of new arrangements.

1.3.3 The principal purpose of 'continuation audit' is to verify that institutions are using effective means to confirm that they are achieving the educational objectives they have set for themselves. The process is built around each institution's analytical account of its quality arrangements, supported by relevant evidence of effective operation of these arrangements. Such evidence is likely to be drawn from existing internal and external review processes, including external assessment, examining and accreditation. The scope of the enquiry will concentrate on four specific areas:

- the institution's strategy for achieving its educational objectives (its 'quality strategy');
- institutional policies for maintaining and improving the quality and standards of programmes and awards;
- the institutional 'learning infrastructure'; and
- internal and external communications.

The process builds on what is already known and has been achieved in the first round of audit.

1.3.4 Information derived from audit to date has, in general, confirmed the GSP finding that while many institutions are seeking to develop more explicit means of articulating and assuring their academic standards, the sector as a whole has yet to develop formal frameworks within which to describe such standards in a consistent, comprehensive and easily understandable manner. The development of such frameworks is complicated by the many changes, noted above, which are altering the ways in which standards are defined and set, as well as reluctance, in principle, to encroach on institutional autonomy.

1.3.5 The Council has sought to assist institutions in responding to change through the production and dissemination of guidance, surveys of current practice and the development of new frameworks. Relevant publications include:

- *Learning from Audit* (HEQC, 1994, 1996a) which has disseminated information on institutional approaches to the assurance of academic standards;
- *Strengthening external examining* (HEQC, 1996h) which has proposed a new national framework for external examining practice;
- *Guidelines for quality assurance* (the revised guidelines – HEQC, 1996j) which build on the earlier *Guidelines* (HEQC, 1994), have incorporated new advice on institutional management of quality and standards;
- *Regulatory frameworks for assuring academic standards in credit-based modular higher education* (HEQC, 1997b): surveys of institutional frameworks to support credit-based modular programmes, to inform institutions, academic staff and examiners of the range of practice in the sector;
- *Improving institutional capacity for self-regulation: an example of an audit framework for checking and verifying the means by which academic standards are set:* development of an internal audit framework to assist institutions in evaluating their approach to the setting, testing, verification and comparison of standards (accessible via the World Wide Web: http://www.niss.ac.uk/education/heqc/);
- collaboration in developing a departmental quality management framework (with the Engineering Professors' Council, published as *Specification for a quality management framework at department level.* EPC, 1996; also accessible on the World Wide Web: http://quoll.maneng.nott.ac.uk/epc/) and a core quality specification at institutional level (with the NHS, relevant professional and statutory bodies, and institutions, published as

Improving the effectiveness of quality assurance systems in non-medical health care education and training HEQC/NHS, 1996; also accessible via Compuserve in the Professionals' Forum under the Health/Social Care section of the library archives). Both these developments demonstrate how the requirements of different stakeholders for information and evidence about the quality and standards of education can be integrated in ways which meet their needs without either unnecessary duplication or extensive bureaucracy.

1.4 The report of the Joint Planning Group: development of new quality assurance arrangements

1.4.1 The report of the *Joint Planning Group for quality assurance in the UK* (1996) envisages continuing scrutiny, through institution-wide review, of the arrangements made by each institution for assuring academic standards in the institution as a whole. It will also be the responsibility of institutions carrying out subject/programme area review, building on current approaches to teaching quality assessment, to consider:

> *a) the way in which the academic standards which an institution expects students to attain in the area under review are identified by the provider unit involved;*
>
> *b) the way in which the attainment of those standards is monitored; and*
>
> *c) the form in which their attainment is described (paragraph 14).*

1.4.2 The new process will therefore yield a good deal of information about how institutions set, monitor and describe the achievement of their standards at programme level.

1.4.3 The report also states that the matter of the 'appropriateness' of standards was considered by the Group. The report concludes:

> *Our approach to this (ie, 'appropriateness') assumes that the standards which are deemed appropriate for the award of a particular qualification are a shared responsibility involving those who design and validate programmes, those who teach and assess students, and those who award the degrees or diplomas. ..... In our view, it would be neither appropriate nor desirable for the new agency to define what the standards of degrees and other awards should be in terms of curricular content and assessment criteria.*

1.4.4 In the Group's previous report, further comments were made; for example,

> *The ability of the quality assurance framework (of the new agency) to address the question [of appropriateness] will be dependent upon the institutions and subject communities agreeing collectively what standards of attainment should be in higher education, and how they should be described.*
>
> *The precise way in which this approach to addressing standards will be implemented, including its impact on the final judgements contained in the review, will need to be developed by the agency through consultation with institutions, and in the light of the HEQC's work on the Graduate Standards Programme.*

The first steps in assisting institutions and subject communities to move towards achieving a measure of collective agreement on what standards of attainment should be in higher education are reported in the action plan which arises from the GSP recommendations and consultation (see below paragraph 2).

1.5 Appropriateness of standards

1.5.1 The GSP findings suggest that 'appropriateness' of standards has several dimensions, for example:

i) appropriateness of the programme to the level (eg, diploma or degree) and type of award (single subject or combined subject; professional or vocational);

ii) appropriateness of the programme content to a degree in that subject, professional or vocational field (ie, appropriateness of coverage; depth and breadth);

iii) appropriateness of the education offered by the institution in terms of any broader educational expectations underlying higher education programmes and awards (eg, development of key skills; enterprise or capability skills).

1.5.2 In terms of an institution's responsibilities, 'appropriateness of standards' could be scrutinised and tested at different points, for example:

i) in relation to the institution's range of awards (including descriptors of level and award, rationale for titles and credit-rating where appropriate). The GSP (and the Harris Report's) recommendations on a typology/framework for awards would provide a collective reference point for awards across UK higher education against which each institution's own awards can be positioned;

ii) in terms of links between programmes and awards, or programmes/programme elements and credits (existing guidelines refer to these topics and will soon be updated through the work of regional and national credit consortia);

iii) in relation to admissions criteria and admissions strategies linked to mission, aims and objectives, and educational portfolio – the revised guidelines (HEQC, 1996j) refer to these topics;

iv) in relation to the design and approval/validation or accreditation of programmes and programme elements, and subsequently in the monitoring and review of programmes, to ensure the appropriateness of admission and progression requirements, objectives, core and optional elements, assessment strategies etc. These are referred to in the GSP recommendations and many are already included in current quality assurance processes;

v) in relation to the assessment of students, and the grading, classification and recording of their performance, including independent scrutiny by external examiners. The revised guidelines refer to these areas, as do some of the GSP recommendations;

vi) in relation to wider educational opportunities offered by institutions and/or expected by employers, students themselves or other interested parties (this is an area that may not always be included explicitly in institutional quality assurance arrangements. However, current guidance on support for student learning and careers guidance draws attention to the importance of such opportunities. GSP recommendations on degree dimensions are relevant; and current work in progress within the sector on key skills/vocational qualifications and higher education is likely to bring further developments in this area);

vii) in relation to the quality of teaching and learning (programme, department and subject reviews currently test this, incorporating student evaluations);

viii) in relation to the management, development and deployment of staff and other resources (HEQCj refers, as do the GSP recommendations).

1.5.3 External reference points, or external verification processes, are already built into many of these institutional processes. For example, programme design, validation and accreditation usually involve external peers, professional bodies or employers; external examining involves external peers or practitioners, as does the process of departmental review. International perspectives may also be included and are becoming increasingly important. The guidelines emphasise the importance of, and seek to strengthen, such external referents. The GSP recommendations seek to provide a more secure framework for professional judgements about standards through the development of peer networks with a focus on academic standards, training and support for those involved in assessing students, and the use of systematic bench-marking to compare practice across institutions.

2 ACTION ARISING FROM THE GSP

2.1 Arising from the consultation on the GSP draft report (undertaken by the representative bodies of higher education institutions and the Council), as well as from developments elsewhere, for example, in relation to credit-based learning and postgraduate education, work has been put in train in a number of areas, with the approval of the Graduate Standards Steering Committee and HEQC Board. The purposes which underpin this work are:

- to clarify academic standards within a diverse, mass higher education system for the benefit of academic practice and public information;
- to map diversity so as to enable legitimate comparisons to be made locally, nationally and internationally and to identify limits to variability where necessary;
- to assist in the development of a cost-effective and integrated approach to the assurance and enhancement of standards, which builds on the responsibilities of institutions, professional and subject groups and the new QAAHE, and which is informed by the interests of students, employers and funding agents.

2.2 The programme of work which has been initiated by the Quality Enhancement Group in 1996-97 is already addressing the three broad themes identified by the GSP as requiring attention: a need for greater clarity and security in relation to standards and for greater comparability within relevant parameters. Each area is capable of subsequent development in the light of the priorities of the new Quality Assurance Agency and the new Government, the recommendations of the Dearing Committee and responses to them. The areas of work, like the GSP itself, include a series of projects which are integrated and mutually supportive. The projects are listed below:

i) Postgraduate standards: an issue raised by the Harris Report (HEFCE, 1996). A small-scale investigation of non-conversion master's courses to identify issues that need to be addressed by internal and external QA processes;

ii) Postgraduate typology/awards framework: a specific commission arising from the Harris Report and requested by the CVCP and SCOP, supported by HEFCE. The aims are to develop a typology for postgraduate programmes which will lead to the publication of a public directory, and to address the nomenclature of awards as part of developing a national awards framework. The development of such a framework has also been supported by institutions for other higher education awards at degree and sub-degree levels. It should be seen in the light of other developments in the sector and outside it, for example, current efforts (through the Inter-Credit Consortia Project – InCCA – and the Scottish Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer – SCOTCAT – and the Northern Ireland Consortium for Access and Transfer – NICAT and others) to work towards national convergence of regional credit frameworks, and the development of qualifications frameworks at other levels/forms of education (through the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Development of an awards framework has also been informed by the results of a specific commission from the National Inquiry into Higher Education to examine other European qualifications frameworks – a sample study was undertaken by HEQC in January and February 1997, covering five countries.

iii) Programme profile for undergraduate programmes: in parallel with work in the post-graduate field, a 'programme profiling tool' is being developed and tested with a variety of groups as a means of making differences or similarities between undergraduate programmes more explicit. Use of a device of this kind can also encourage greater consistency in programme approval/validation processes and assist requirements for information for professional accreditation and other quality assurance purposes.

iv) Relationships between credit/levels/standards/awards: this project, which is supported by COSHEP and all Scottish institutions, has a specific focus on developing revised SCOTCAT guidelines. Its general focus is on clarifying relationships between credit and award frameworks,

and on articulating the meaning and use of 'level' in relation to each. The work will also feed both into HEQC and the InCCA project mentioned above.

v) Promoting greater explicitness: pilot work with a number of institutions and certain subject networks has been initiated. This aims to test the 'range of degree dimensions' and 'graduate attributes profile' developed by the GSP as mechanisms for promoting greater explicitness about academic requirements for, and outcomes from, degrees. This work will inform institutional quality assurance processes and assist in the design of an integrated QA process; it may also inform the wider development of student transcripts and records of achievement.

vi) Recording student attainment: a survey of the range of existing institutional practice, national and European initiatives already in train (eg, by the DfEE-funded credit consortia, UCAS and the European Union's (EU) 'Diploma Supplement'), undertaken as background for any move towards developing a more consistent national approach;

vii) Student assessment: two institutional consortia are being supported by HEQC to test the bench-marking process as a means of identifying ways of improving and achieving greater consistency in the assessment process and assessment regulations. Their findings will inform any future development of bench-marking within consortia as a means of comparing and improving practice in relation to academic standards and will assist in the preparation of future guidance on student assessment.

viii) Extending the role of subject networks: to assist in the articulation and monitoring of standards. Twenty SAs are developing pilots specifically linked to the GSP recommendations.

2.3 There are a number of GSP recommendations which, although supported by the consultation process, have not yet been taken forward systematically by HEQC, although in some cases, development has been taken forward by institutions individually. These include those listed below.

i) External examining: assisting institutions individually and collectively to strengthen external examining, building on recent guidelines, but including attention to the resourcing of the system.

ii) Evaluation of standards through the use of data/archives: preparing guidance for institutions, based on existing good practice and on pilot work with institutions and other agencies, to establish the kinds of data/archives and the methods for using such information to evaluate standards and inform standard setting.

iii) Review of the classification system and honours degrees: preparation of a specification for a commissioned project to examine options, including international models.

iv) Further **international work** to investigate the relative standing of UK qualifications/standards with other EU member states in order to inform UK institutions and the QAAHE.

v) Threshold standards: the original remit of the GSP was concerned with the development of threshold standards. Responses to the consultation identified numerous difficulties in developing threshold standards. Moving forward on the recommendations outlined above will clarify standards and will resolve many of the issues which gave rise to a call for threshold standards.

2.4 On the basis of the consultation, certain options/recommendations received little or no support and it is not proposed to pursue these further:

i) the consultation confirmed opposition to the development of national curricula and national assessment arrangements;

ii) separating teaching from summative assessment was rejected on pedagogic grounds and in the interests of protecting diversity and innovation in teaching and assessment;

iii) there was a lack of support for the use of external tests as an approach to threshold standards.

2.5 **Priorities:** based on the findings of the GSP and the outcomes of consultation, priority should be given to the themes of clarity and security about standards. This includes:

- agreement on degree dimensions;

- greater explicitness about expected outcomes from modules, programmes and awards;
- development of an awards/credit framework and associated programme typologies and student transcripts;
- training in assessment practice;
- support for peer judgement about standards;
- strengthening external examining;
- giving full and explicit attention to standards in the design/approval of programmes/programme elements – and in their re-validation and review;
- undertaking systematic comparisons of assessment practice/regulations to aid consistency and to enhance practice.

2.6 **Timescales:** some work can be put in train at national level quickly, as described above, but implementation in institutions is likely to take much longer – approximately three to five years depending on institutional size and current position. The speed at which recommendations can be taken forward will depend greatly on the level of political will to take action (at national and local levels) and the level of resource available, particularly in terms of staff time. Current pressures on the time of academic staff were noted in many institutional responses.

2.7 **Resources:** in undertaking the Graduate Standards Programme to date, HEQC has used the resources of its Quality Enhancement Group (QEG) (five full-time education staff have been working directly on the GSP), project budgets drawn up from institutional subscriptions to HEQC (approximately £300,000 from 1994-97, directly attributable to the GSP) and some additional resources raised from elsewhere (£60,000 in 1995-96 from DfEE and CSU). Project budgets have been used to pay institutions or institutional staff for involvement in projects and to supply some external consultancy support. In addition, academic staff and QA staff from institutions have given time to participate in the GSP investigations and consultations. The total resources to date have been relatively small when compared with other initiatives such as the DfEE's Enterprise Initiative (£60 million over five years, with four higher education advisers and about 20 support staff) or the HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, linked to TQA outcomes (£4 million per annum to support approximately 40 projects, with three co-ordinators in addition to HEFCE support staff). Within the sector there are also a range of other resources and activities focused on 'enhancement' or 'assurance'.

2.8 To obtain a clearer picture of the level of resource needed to take forward the actions proposed above requires, as a first step, detailed costing of each proposed action and would be part of the preparation of a budget plan for the QAAHE. Beyond the resources needed at national level, the cost to institutions is likely to be variable, depending on their starting position, size and other factors. In some institutions, much has already been done and the consultation confirmed this.

2.9 The cost of developing frameworks, tools and guidelines is unlikely to be substantial (current HEQC resourcing patterns provide a model), but the cost of implementation in institutions is likely to be much greater and will include the cost of changing procedures, mapping and making explicit existing practice, gathering new information, and training/re-training staff. In particular, major resources (staff time, infrastructure costs and payment of fees) are likely to be incurred in relation to external examiners, development of archives and development of subject networks.

2.10 It is possible that new resources could be sought from the DfEE, at least to support the development costs of implementing the proposed/agreed actions. An alternative is to seek a transfer or redirection of resources currently devoted to other areas of quality assurance or enhancement. Achieving such a transfer depends on the level of national consensus (across institutions, funding councils, DfEE, in particular, as well as other interested parties) as to the priority that should be given to the standards agenda. It is clear that only slow and piecemeal progress will be made in implementing the GSP recommendations if the work is not given priority in the allocation of resources at all levels.