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G R A D U A T E
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S T A N D A R D S
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P R O G R A M M E
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FINAL REPORT

VOLUME 1
THE REPORT

The mission of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) is to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of quality, at all levels, in institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom. HEQC is a company limited by guarantee and is funded by subscriptions from individual universities and colleges of higher education. The services it provides cover:

- quality assurance, including the regular auditing of the ways in which institutions discharge their responsibilities for standards and quality;
- quality enhancement, including the dissemination of good practice;
- acting as a national voice on quality issues in higher education.

The Council also advises the Secretaries of State for Education, Scotland and Wales on applications from institutions for degree awarding powers and university title.

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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

THE PURPOSE OF THE TWO VOLUMES

The report and its supplementary material are presented in two volumes.

VOLUME 1

Volume 1 consists of the report itself. It is aimed at the general reader and gives a concise account of:

- the background to the Graduate Standards Programme (GSP);
- its main outcomes;
- the view emerging from the outcomes of the way forward for standards and quality assurance in UK higher education;
- the actions recommended;
- the progress towards implementing the recommendations and the further action required; and
- a glossary.

VOLUME 2

Volume 2 consists of supplementary material. It is aimed at readers who require more detail on particular aspects of the GSP and provides:

- the specific background to the Programme and the methods of investigation adopted;
- further details of the work undertaken and its findings;
- a full account of the recommendations and options presented in the November 1996 draft final report;
- the results of the consultation on the draft report and overview of work relating to the GSP recommendations currently being undertaken in higher education institutions;
- further details on the implications of the GSP for developments in quality assurance;
- a bibliography, the original terms of reference of the GSP, examples of GSP pilot work, the circulation of the draft report, a list of respondents to the draft report, and details of the membership of the GSP Steering Committee and of the various GSP advisory bodies.

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

1.1 The Graduate Standards Programme (GSP) began to consider the development of threshold standards for first degrees in June 1994. The work of the GSP is now complete, having been subject to extensive consultation with higher education and its partners, and the detailed results are incorporated in the outcomes (beginning paragraph 5.1).

OUTCOMES

General themes

1.2 *Comparability*: there is no consensus that UK degrees are broadly comparable with one another. What is needed are means by which the level, purposes and standards of programmes and the qualifications to which they lead can be plotted in relation to each other and to agreed bench-marks (5.3 - 5.6).

1.3 *Clarity and explicitness*: because of changes in UK higher education and its immediate environment, greater clarity and explicitness are required concerning the purposes of higher education, and the aims and standards of programmes of study (5.7 - 5.11).

1.4 *Assessment and the strengthening of academic judgement*: those involved in assessing students should be as well prepared as possible to appreciate the technical aspects of assessment. There is also a need for the provision of new opportunities for staff to clarify and strengthen judgements of standards to ensure consistency of assessment decisions among assessors (5.12 - 5.20).

Specific issues

1.5 *Threshold standards*: these are seen as desirable but in general require the prior implementation of other recommendations (5.22 - 5.25).

1.6 *Level and credit*: increased attention to standards requires clarity as to the meaning of the credits and levels associated with higher education programmes (5.26 - 5.35).

1.7 *Awards*: the titles of higher education awards in the UK are often thought to provide insufficient information or to be confusing. A national awards framework is needed (5.36 - 5.40).

1.8 *The general attributes expected of graduates*: respondents believe that graduates possess attributes that distinguish them from non-graduates, and that these qualities share at least family resemblances. These attributes need to be clarified and elaborated within the context of particular fields, programmes and institutional missions (5.41 - 5.44).

1.9 *Graduate standards and Key Skills*: the sharper focus on standards encouraged by the GSP complements the introduction of Key Skills within higher education, by making explicit the intended outcomes of programmes of study. This will make it easier to map graduates' attributes against the requirements of employment (5.46 - 5.48).

OVERALL OUTCOME

1.10 The work of the GSP shows that any move towards threshold standards involves the prior attainment of two other objectives (supplemented and supported by measures to ensure greater consistency in the procedures relating to them) (5.49). These are:

- the creation of a clear, publicly accessible vocabulary and coherent structures with which to describe and plot the diversity of higher education; and
- the establishment of mechanisms to strengthen the exercise of shared academic judgement to provide greater security and comparability of standards within agreed boundaries.

THE WAY FORWARD

Principles

1.11 The GSP recommends action to protect diversity (and prevent standardisation) so as to sustain the value and currency of degrees within the context of institutional autonomy (6.1 - 6.5).

ACTION PLAN

1.12 Building upon work already under way in institutions, the actions listed below – which were supported in the consultations – are recommended (7.2).

- Five actions to increase **clarity and explicitness** by:
 - i) promoting and supporting institutional explicitness about standards;
 - ii) agreeing to a range of dimensions against which the intended outcomes of degrees should be plotted;
 - iii) delineating a descriptive awards framework;
 - iv) providing a typology of programmes and means of profiling their intended outcomes;
 - v) agreeing to a UK-wide system of student transcripts.
- Seven actions to increase **comparability and security and to strengthen academic judgement** by:
 - vi) ensuring that intended standards are given close attention in the design and approval of programmes;
 - vii) increasing the training and development opportunities for internal assessors and examiners;
 - viii) providing new fora in which examiners may review their practice and calibrate standards;
 - ix) strengthening external examining;
 - x) aligning assessment conventions and bench-marking practice;
 - xi) developing the use of archives and other data to evaluate standards;
 - xii) providing new opportunities for subject associations and professional and statutory bodies (PSBs) to participate in the identification and review of standards.
- Two actions to progress work on **threshold standards** by:
 - xiii) ensuring that each institution clarifies its own threshold standards;
 - xiv) preparing a project specification for the review of the current honours degree and classification system.

1.13 The timescale for implementation varies greatly from one recommendation to the next, and depends also on the political will and resources available (7.8). However, if progress is to be made, priority must be given to the allocation of resources (7.9 - 7.12).

2 INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

2.1 This is the Final Report of the Graduate Standards Programme of HEQC. Its purpose is to set out the outcomes of the Programme and to outline the action that arises from it. It is directed towards the higher education community, its various constituencies and the wider public. The report calls for action across higher education, by universities and colleges, individually and collectively, by subject and professional groups, and by national bodies, including the newly-established Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE). The report's proposals have major implications for the future shape of the integrated external system of quality assurance that is being developed in UK higher education. It concludes with an account of how the GSP's proposals have been received, what has already been done to implement them, what is being done, and what is yet to be done.

2.2 The GSP was designed to enable the academic community and those who work with it to gain an early appreciation of new and powerful challenges to which higher education has to respond. These challenges result from the interplay of many factors, such as rapid growth (followed by consolidation), increasing diversification, curriculum innovation, changes in students' and employers' expectations of higher education, the widespread introduction of information technology, straitened resources and growing internationalisation.

2.3 The Programme's recommendations aim to provide the means by which these challenges can be addressed in positive and creative ways that will:

- safeguard academic standards;
- protect academic freedom;
- enhance the international standing of UK qualifications; and
- provide clear and publicly-accessible information to strengthen accountability.

3 BACKGROUND

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE UK

3.1 Over the last decade or so, UK higher education has devoted increasing attention to the creation and development of formal mechanisms for quality assurance and – particularly in the last three years – to the clarification and comparison of academic standards. These developments, which find parallels in other countries, are widely recognised as resulting from the fundamental changes that have taken place in higher education and its immediate environment. The steep rise in the number of students, the increasing variety of subjects and programmes of study available and the growing economic salience of higher-level skills and knowledge have together led to the transformation of higher education in the UK into a mass, diverse system. In such a system, the interlocking sets of activities which had hitherto been thought adequate to assure academic standards, no longer suffice. There is a growing perception, both inside and outside higher education, that these long-standing, but relatively informal, practices need to be strengthened and supplemented by the establishment of new formal, collective mechanisms to assure standards.

3.2 The establishment in 1964 of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) to oversee non-university higher education led to the introduction of formal procedures for the approval and review of degree and other award-bearing courses. With the establishment of the polytechnics from 1969, and the subsequent growth of these institutions and of the colleges of higher education, the CNAA procedures became increasingly well-known, widely practised and emulated. As institutions developed mechanisms that took greater responsibility for the quality assurance of their own provision, these procedures were progressively modified to provide greater institutional autonomy. In addition, the polytechnics and colleges also fell within the field of responsibility of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).

3.3 The publication of the Reynolds and Sutherland reports¹ marked a growing interest among the universities in the formalisation of procedures. This led to the creation of an Academic Audit Unit by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). This unit established an explicit national procedure by which the quality assurance processes of the universities might be subject to external peer scrutiny. It thus acknowledged the need for accountability in matters of quality and standards.

3.4 The passage of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 resulted in the unification of the various parts of UK higher education and the granting of university title to the former polytechnics and some major colleges. At the same time, three higher education funding councils were established (in England, Scotland and Wales) and the CNA and Her Majesty's Inspectorate for higher education were dissolved. The funding councils began to undertake a process of subject-based teaching quality assessment (TQA) which took somewhat different forms in the three countries. (In Northern Ireland the Department of Education, Northern Ireland is responsible for higher education funding, and contracts with the Higher Education Funding Council for England to undertake TQA in the province.) In addition, a new organisation, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), was set up by the bodies representing higher education institutions (the CVCP, the Standing Conference of Principals of Colleges of Higher Education (SCOP) and the Conference of Scottish Centrally Funded Colleges (CSCFC)). The HEQC was given responsibility across all UK higher education for quality audit (the scrutiny of institutions' quality assurance arrangements), for the enhancement of quality, and for various other functions. These included arrangements for the recognition of Access Courses in England and Wales and for advising the relevant Secretaries of State on the granting to institutions of degree awarding powers and university title. The Council was also made responsible, under the Charters for Higher Education, for handling complaints about misleading information in prospectuses.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS

3.5 Both teaching quality assessment (as undertaken by the funding councils) and quality audit (as undertaken by HEQC) start from an institution's – or course team's – own definitions of purposes and standards. Thus, neither process seeks to address the appropriateness of these purposes and standards, nor how they compare, where relevant, with those set by other institutions and course teams. Each – though in different ways – has been concerned with *fitness for purpose* rather than *fitness of purpose*.

THE ORIGINS OF THE GSP

3.6 Since its establishment, HEQC has been concerned with issues concerning the security and comparability of academic standards (and, thus, with *fitness of purpose*) through, for example, its work to map and strengthen external examining. These issues became prominent as matters of more public interest in the mid-1990s, particularly in the context of international comparability. In April 1994 the then Secretary of State for Education invited HEQC and higher education collectively to give greater attention to 'broad comparability of standards'. The Council responded by focusing more sharply on academic standards within the audit process. It invited institutions to indicate whether they had a corporate policy on standards and, if so, to state how that policy was implemented and its effectiveness monitored; and how far it was informed by measures to ensure comparability with other institutions. The Council also undertook further work on external examining by consulting on how it might be strengthened. The CVCP, in turn, responded to the Secretary of State, with the support of SCOP, by asking HEQC to consider the development of threshold standards for first degrees. These were the origins of the Graduate Standards Programme. (The terms of reference of the GSP, the approach it adopted and the stages of its development are described in detail in Volume 2.)

3.7 Academic standards, however, exist in particular contexts. They only take on meaning in relation to the purposes of programmes of study, which in turn derive from conceptions of the purposes of higher education as a whole. In parallel with the start of the GSP, the then Department

¹ Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, *Academic Standards in Universities* (The Reynolds Report). CVCP, 1986 and Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, *Academic Standards in Universities: A Third Report* (The Sutherland Report). CVCP, 1989.

of Education established a Review of Higher Education in late 1994 that included consideration of its purposes. This Review was subsumed into a broader National Inquiry into UK Higher Education in 1996. The Inquiry was charged to 'make recommendations on how the shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years'. Since the Inquiry's establishment, it has become clear that it is devoting considerable attention to the question of standards and that recommendations concerning them will be made in the Committee's report, which is due to be published shortly. The GSP has kept in close touch with the issues raised in these reviews.

THE NEW SINGLE AGENCY FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

3.8 As the work of the GSP was beginning, a consensus also started to emerge that it would be desirable to move towards a new, single system of quality assurance in higher education that would embrace both quality and standards. A Joint Planning Group (JPG) for Quality Assurance in the UK was set up in 1995. The Committee's Final Report was published late in 1996 and recommended the establishment of a new agency. This agency (subsequently named the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) is to take over all the existing functions of HEQC, together with the teaching quality assessments currently carried out by the funding councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and, in due course, in Scotland. It will develop a new, integrated process of quality assurance that will consider, among other things, how academic standards are identified, their attainment monitored, and that attainment described.

4 DEFINITION AND APPROACH

DEFINITION

4.1 The definition of academic standards adopted by the Council – 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.

4.2 The same definition was then employed within the GSP both to ensure consistency of approach and because it appeared to command the collective support of the higher educational community.

4.3 This definition concentrates particularly on standards of attainment. It was chosen because it was judged to capture the academic requirements 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 deciding 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 conclusion of the GSP is that the Council's definition of academic standards is one that should be strongly upheld and promoted in UK higher education.

APPROACH

4.5 From its inception, the GSP was designed to be a collaborative endeavour, carried out by HEQC in partnership with higher education and its various constituencies. The GSP strove to support institutions and academic staff in dealing with the challenge of how best to determine, assess, record and compare the achievement of academic standards in the newly emerging context of a mass, heterogeneous higher education system. The Programme sought to map existing practice and to encourage the academic community to engage in a critical and pro-active discussion of its findings.

For example, at each stage of the Programme, as provisional conclusions took shape, they were tested in dialogue with those involved to inform the next stage of the work and to encourage changes in practice where these seemed necessary. Some two thousand people from within higher education and outside have contributed in some way to the GSP. This approach has helped to encourage greater ownership and commitment across higher education and its constituencies than might otherwise have been the case. It means that the Programme has served not simply to explore the present situation and to suggest ways forward, but also to support a considerable range of development and enhancement work within institutions.

5 OUTCOMES

5.1 The outcomes of the GSP emerge from the findings of the various investigations undertaken. But they are more than that: they embody the results of the consultations on the draft final report of the GSP and are informed by the results of further work carried out by HEQC since the publication of that report. (The results of the consultations are considered in detail in Volume 2.) The outcomes can also be seen as forming the outlines of an emerging consensus within UK higher education on how work on standards should be taken forward. They are grouped under two headings: general themes and specific issues.

GENERAL THEMES

5.2 The general themes are:

- comparability;
- clarity and explicitness; and
- the strengthening of academic judgement in the assessment of students.

Comparability

5.3 The coming into being of a mass higher education system in the UK has stimulated interest in whether or not standards of degrees from different institutions are comparable. Until the last decade or so, UK higher education was generally regarded as an elite system that consisted of a few rather similar institutions, drew its students from a restricted and homogeneous section of the population and was dominated by full-time programmes of study of similar structure in a limited range of subjects. Although such a perception was almost certainly exaggerated and over-simplified, it encouraged students, employers and others to assume that UK degrees were in some significant sense directly comparable with one another. (Indeed, in 1964, this assumption was formally enshrined in the charter of the Council for National Academic Awards and was implicit in the working of the external examiner system.)

5.4 The assumption of general comparability has now been eroded by many factors. These include expansion, growing heterogeneity of applicants and the increasing variety of modes of study and academic structures. There are now few generally agreed criteria that enable a secure judgement to be made, for example, about whether the standard of one degree in a particular class in a given subject is comparable to that in another institution; still less, whether there is comparability between subjects, or over the passage of time. What is more, many employers report that they are uncertain what the possession of a degree should be taken to signify.

5.5 The GSP has shown that there is no general consensus, either within or outside higher education, that UK degrees are broadly comparable with one another in terms of an equivalence of output standards. The evidence in support of this conclusion is drawn, for example, from the Council's statistical study of degree variability, its explorations of the generic attributes of graduates, and its work on awards and on the external examiner system. Indeed, many participants in the Council's deliberations questioned whether such a notion of comparability has any place in a mass, diverse system. Some have even cast doubt on whether UK degrees were ever comparable with one another in a strict sense.

5.6 These conclusions point to the need for new approaches to the comparability of academic standards. As differentiation increases, new measures are required to define the level, purposes and standards of programmes (and their component parts), and the qualifications to which they lead. This will enable them to be mapped and understood, both in relation to each other, and to agreed bench-marks. To do so will require the development of a clear and consistently applied terminology to make it easier to judge the comparability and appropriateness of the standards of particular programmes and qualifications; and to prevent their inappropriate comparison with others having different intended outcomes.

Clarity and explicitness

5.7 The GSP has noted that judgements of standards in many fields, including higher education, are ultimately rooted in the shared (and generally tacit) values of specialist communities. These values tend not to be articulated explicitly, but are realised through the practice of that community. In consequence, the new entrant to a particular academic field tends to absorb them more or less unconsciously through participation in day-to-day activity and interaction with other academics. (This may take place, for example, through debate about such issues as: the evaluation of a student's work, the adequacy of the proposed solution to a problem, the quality of a new piece of research, or the merits of a manuscript submitted for publication.)

5.8 Nonetheless, the recent changes in the nature of higher education in the UK mean that ways of making standards more explicit have to be found, while recognising that there are ultimately limits to that explicitness. There is already much good practice in higher education that aims to clarify and render explicit the implicit standards embodied in the work of a particular field, and to bring them into the public domain by making them accessible to students and non-academics. The consultation on the draft report of the GSP shows that there is strong support among higher education institutions for a further substantial move in this direction. However, it is also recognised that greater clarity and explicitness have to be supplemented by measures to strengthen shared judgement, because it is upon the soundness of that judgement, and the extent to which it is shared, that the maintenance of standards ultimately depends.

5.9 Changes in higher education and its environment mean that it is no longer reasonable to assume that academics and students share an unspoken understanding of the purposes of higher education or of the intended aims and standards of programmes of study. In an open society in which accountability is valued it is not reasonable to expect employers, students and those who fund them to accept the standards and outcomes of higher education on the basis of unquestioning trust.

5.10 Greater explicitness of aim and outcome is required, and also clarification and dissemination of the criteria against which the attainments of students are assessed. Not only will this make higher education more comprehensible to non-academic audiences, but it will also help staff to ensure that they employ the most appropriate means to facilitate and assess students' learning. Such explicitness would also serve to avoid mismatches between, on the one hand, the actual attainment of students and, on the other, the expectations that employers have of them. There is evidence that many apparent concerns about standards are, in reality, examples of such mismatches. The root cause of this may be that the public understanding of higher education has failed to keep pace with the frequent changes and rapid innovations that have occurred there. Even academics may not realise fully the external consequences of the changes that have taken place in their own environment.

5.11 The Council's work on 'graduateness' (described in sections 5.41 - 5.44 below) has focused attention on what degrees should signify. It has encouraged reflection on how outcomes of various specific sorts might be achieved and assessed. It has also helped to identify the balance of attributes (types of knowledge, understanding and skills) that are acquired through study of a particular subject, field or collection of subjects. This work has begun to provide a basis for greater clarity. The further development of typologies, profiles, and frameworks, will facilitate the recognition of sameness and difference with the aim of informing more fully the choices of students and employers.

Assessment and the strengthening of academic judgement

5.12 Student assessment is clearly central to standards. If the work of students is not assessed by valid and reliable methods, standards cannot be rigorous. The challenges confronting assessment today are considerably greater than in the past. Factors such as the growing number and variety of programmes of study; the increasing numbers of students and the diversity of their educational backgrounds; and the growing variety of means of assessment make the tasks of establishing validity and reliability – and thus, as appropriate, comparability – more complex and more difficult.

5.13 Two issues above all arise from a consideration of assessment and standards. The first is the need for academic and administrative staff to be as well prepared as possible to appreciate the technical aspects of assessment. It is essential, for instance, that they can understand the implications of various combination and compensation rules for the aggregation of marks, and their use to classify students' performance. A strong feeling exists within those higher education institutions that commented on the recommendation regarding the training and development of assessors that such training should be a much higher priority than at present (for further information see Volume 2, Section 4).

5.14 The second issue is the need for assessors' decisions to be consistently rigorous and well-founded. The GSP confirmed that such consistency is the product of a shared culture of assessment that derives from factors such as repeated discussions and other interactions over time, the use and understanding of exemplars, and the creation of assessor networks. Although written instructions, mark schemes and specified criteria are necessary to promote greater explicitness and to support consistency of judgement, they cannot remedy the lack of a shared assessment culture.

5.15 There are growing signs that current trends in the organisation of higher education, and in the practice of assessment within it, tend to hinder the formation of common understandings and the sharing of standards even within a single institution or programme. These trends, which stem mainly from the rapid growth in the numbers of students and the spread of modularisation, include, for example, a movement towards fragmented marking, formula-driven awards and small examination boards. There is, as yet, only limited evidence that actions are being taken to offset these trends. What is more, the results of the GSP suggests that many of the staff currently carrying out assessment in higher education acquired their shared understandings of standards by being socialised into their particular academic culture at a time when the links between course design and assessment were closer than at present. It is not obvious that new staff with an equivalent level of expertise will generally be available when their older colleagues retire. Only a few universities and colleges appear to try to ensure systematically that new staff are inducted into shared assessment cultures to the same extent as in the past.

5.16 What is required, therefore, is the provision of new opportunities for staff to discuss and compare students' work. These must be linked to the systematic and careful consideration of assessment issues within the processes of programme design, validation and review.

5.17 Much also needs to be done to strengthen the external examiner system, which is still perceived by many academics and others to be the main guarantor of standards in UK higher education. HEQC has already published a framework² designed to provide a consistent national approach to external examining, while maintaining sufficient flexibility within and between institutions.

5.18 This framework sets out the purposes of external examining as:

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

²Higher Education Quality Council, *Strengthening external examining*. HEQC, London: 1996.

5.19 The framework has been developed on the expectation that institutions will define and make explicit the aims of their system (or systems) of external examining, and especially, the parameters of comparability that they employ (for example, other programmes that they use as bench-marks). It takes account of the fact that the ways in which external examiners are used will vary between institutions, but, nonetheless, embodies a set of core expectations. These 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 examinations, 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, or relevant agent, which includes commentary and judgements on the validity, reliability and integrity of the assessment process and the standards of student attainment.

It is expected also that institutions should:

- consider the reports of external examiners and reply to them (and other relevant parties) outlining any actions taken in consequence of the reports.

5.20 The external examiner framework has been widely welcomed. The next step is its general application. But that is not the end of the matter. Substantial development work is also needed to counter the forces that have been eroding the effectiveness of external examining and to strengthen the system as a whole. For example, there is room for subject associations to become more involved in co-ordinating the approaches taken by external examiners, as some have begun to do. This could involve matters such as the training, accreditation, registration and professional development of external examiners, the circulation of exemplars or the moderation of their work (as already practised by some professional and statutory bodies). There is much that institutions, too, can do, for instance, by the systematic induction and briefing of all examiners, which is already done in certain institutions.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

5.21 The specific issues that emerged from the work of the GSP are:

- threshold standards;
- level and credit;
- awards;
- the general attributes expected of graduates; and
- graduate standards and Key Skills.

Threshold standards

5.22 The CVCP asked HEQC 'to consider the development of threshold standards for first degrees'. The GSP found evidence of significant support in principle for the development of threshold standards, both within higher education and outside. Some academics were attracted to the idea because it seemed 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 threshold standards, by definition, concern only minimum acceptable performance. These would therefore leave universities and colleges to interpret performance above the threshold level in diverse ways appropriate to their particular missions and objectives.

5.23 Representatives of higher education's external constituencies – employers, students and professional and statutory bodies – also generally found the idea of threshold standards attractive. They saw it as a means of achieving public accountability in a world where higher education has become a large-scale activity that makes major demands on the public purse, touches a large

proportion of the population, and is central to national economic and social well-being. Many respondents thought that a publicly-accessible threshold standard would ensure that all stakeholders in higher education hold common understandings of the minimum level of attainment associated with higher education awards.

5.24 Although threshold standards were widely regarded as desirable, the Council's detailed investigations through the GSP did not suggest that they were yet generally feasible. There were three main reasons for this conclusion. First, the tendency for standards not to be made explicit in academic practice means that there is, currently, no generally agreed vocabulary with which to define threshold standards or to locate them within the context of particular programmes of study. Secondly, there are, at least for the time being, no sufficiently robust mechanisms to make it possible to assess with consistency the attainment of threshold standards across the whole of UK higher education. Thirdly, despite the existence of positively-defined threshold standards in certain programmes of study (for example, in degrees leading to a licence to professional practice, in certain modular schemes and, somewhat more generally, in Scotland), the idea of a positive threshold standard of performance did not yet appear to be reflected in traditional practice within most classified honours degrees. This may be because the tacit concept of standards implied by the current practice of classification seems to lead to 'satisfactory' performance being regarded as roughly equivalent to the second class honours category and to other kinds of performance being graded and ranked in relation to it. (This view also seems to be reflected in the practice of certain professional and statutory bodies (PSBs), which limit corporate membership to graduates with at least second-class honours in the relevant field.)

5.25 The inescapable conclusion is that it is not possible to move immediately to the development of a general threshold for all degrees in a particular broad subject area, still less for all degrees irrespective of subject. Despite the attractiveness of the idea of threshold standards and the support that exists for their development, certain requirements must first be met. These include the achievement of greater clarity and explicitness as to the intended outcomes of programmes of study; the articulation and acceptance of a common vocabulary with which to plot similarities and differences between various higher education programmes; the delineation of a framework within which to position higher education awards; and the reinforcement (or creation) of mechanisms to strengthen and disseminate peer judgements on standards within each particular subject or field. Thus, although the immediate and general development of threshold standards appears infeasible, these recommendations of the GSP – which have attracted support from higher education as a whole – would bring about conditions in which the development of threshold standards could become feasible.

Level and credit

5.26 The work of the GSP confirms that concepts of 'level' and 'credit' are becoming increasingly important in higher education for many reasons. These include:

- the increasing prevalence of modular structures;
- the associated spread of credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) schemes and of credit-based learning;
- the growing emphasis on life-long learning, which has stimulated the creation of many new approaches to learning (for example, the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) or work-based programmes), and a demand for students to be able to move between different learning contexts; and
- international exchanges that have necessitated attempts to establish equivalences between different elements of learning achieved in different national systems.

5.27 In each of these circumstances (and others too), credit at a particular level can be used as an educational currency that may be accumulated and transferred to another programme or institution. It can therefore promote greater educational flexibility and movement within and across institutional and other boundaries.

5.28 Traditionally, the terms 'level' and 'credit' (if used at all) were derived from the progress of full-time students through a course of three or four years. Such time-based approaches, however, now provide little help with the growing task of evaluating the level and volume of learning irrespective of where it has been achieved (for example, in the work-place). As a result, the need for agreed new definitions of 'level' and 'credit' is now far greater than before.

Level

5.29 Typically, academics (and students) have come to understand 'level' tacitly through their induction into a disciplinary community and involvement in academic practice. These tacit understandings have been expressed, for instance, through the design of programmes of study and the choice of subject matter. There has been little need until the last few years to identify more explicitly what is meant by 'level'.

5.30 The changes recently experienced by higher education, however, have led academics to try to make these tacit understandings more explicit. The work of the GSP shows that concepts of level may be used in different ways, which it is useful to distinguish. For example, level may be employed as:

- a measure of intellectual demand or difficulty (as in whether two modules are designed and assessed at the same level);
- a measure of progression through a curriculum or syllabus (as in whether a module at one level has to be completed before studying a module at a higher level); and
- a discriminator in the grading of academic performance (as in a student's work being judged to be at first class honours level).

5.31 In recent years, work has been undertaken to devise more formalised and consistent approaches to the determination of levels of study and of performance.³ They include the delineation of level descriptors, learning outcomes and marking criteria. These aim to set out the characteristics of knowledge, skill and understanding expected at particular stages of higher education and to show how these relate to other stages. Progress on the definition and use of terms relating to level will improve public understanding of what is offered in higher education and will provide a basis with which to clarify discussions of standards. (For further details see Volume 2, Section 2.)

Credit

5.32 The GSP results suggest that the concept of credit is also attracting growing attention in higher education and is closely involved with issues of academic standards. If, as is suggested above, credit is regarded as an educational currency, it is obvious that its value must be preserved if standards are to be assured and enhanced.

5.33 For this reason, HEQC attaches particular importance to the work of regional and national credit consortia. It values the collaboration that is taking place between them and works with them to establish shared frameworks and guidelines for their use.

5.34 The work of the GSP shows that there are inconsistencies in the ways that institutions use credit as an internal accounting mechanism. For instance, significantly more credit may be required in one institution than in another for a student to progress from one stage of a modular structure to the next. Similarly, there is evidence of considerable variation both in the level and volume of credit that different institutions grant to the same national awards (such as those of professional bodies) in what appear to be programmes with similar aims and intended outcomes.

5.35 The GSP has also found that, although there is a growing tendency to define both the unit of credit in particular, and volume of credit in general, in terms of hours of notional learning time, institutions continue to differ in the number of notional hours that they regard as equivalent to one year's full-time study.

³For example, South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC), *Credit guidelines, models and protocols*. DfEE, 1996.

Awards

5.36 The GSP has shown that what is signified by a higher education award in the UK – in terms of the volume, level and nature of students' learning – is often thought to be confusing and ambiguous to intending students and employers.

5.37 The number and variety of higher education awards and programmes have increased sharply in recent years and are accelerating. This movement seems to have been largely unco-ordinated, both within and across institutions. It appears to be driven as much by considerations of marketing as by a striving for national consistency of usage. Indeed, some award titles for example, have very limited currency.

5.38 The GSP reveals a trend for the titles of awards to become longer, more varied and more complex. This seems 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.

5.39 Considerable disparity of practice has been found in approaches to the nomenclature of awards. There are examples of titles that do not show 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 abound. 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 levels of study. The use of terms such as 'pass', 'ordinary', 'unclassified' and 'general' degrees appears to be ambiguous and variable. It is also unusual for degree titles to make clear the difference between 'honours in depth' and 'honours in breadth'.

5.40 The consultations on the draft GSP report showed that many higher education institutions support the recommendation that an awards framework be developed that would make it possible for awards to be positioned in relation to such parameters as level, purpose and subject matter and the nature of the intended learning experience. Such a framework would embrace the typology of postgraduate courses proposed in the recent HEFCE - CVCP-SCOP *Review of postgraduate education*⁴. It would also help to move towards the standardisation of course nomenclature that the report recommends and extend this approach to degree and sub-degree levels. It would clarify both the nature of higher education awards and their relationship to each other, and provide a guide to consistency in nomenclature. In addition it would make it easier to plot the position of higher education awards relative to those of national awarding bodies such as Edexcel, NCVQ and SQA, and to qualifications from other countries.

The general attributes expected of graduates

5.41 One element of the work of the GSP was to explore the expectations that academics had of graduates in their own field, or more generally. The aim was to identify a common language through which to express what, if any, generic qualities were expected of all graduates or of graduates in cognate fields; and to distinguish those factors that make a programme of study or level of student achievement degree-worthy (this came to be called 'graduateness'). Many contributors to the discussions on this work (and to the consultations on the draft GSP report) thought that it had helped to stimulate useful reflection on the nature of a degree. Indeed, in some institutions it had provoked considerable activity. In contrast, some judged a wholly generic notion of 'graduateness' to be of but limited utility.

5.42 There was general agreement that graduates had – or should have – qualities that distinguished them from non-graduates (including those with sub-degree qualifications), although there was little agreement about how these qualities might be measured. Most contributors, both from within higher education and from among its stakeholders, considered that family resemblances could be found among the attributes expected of graduates within clusters of cognate degrees, if not more widely.

⁴ Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Review of postgraduate education*. HEFCE, Bristol: 1996.

They also noted that these resemblances could only be properly identified by understanding how they are exemplified in particular contexts such as that of a discipline, a programme of study with specific purposes, or the explicit mission of an institution.

5.43 This view was borne out by evidence that, to some extent, a common language was already in use in the process of assessment, but that its meanings varied according to institutional, professional and subject contexts. Again, it appeared that these meanings could only be clarified, and their relationships to one another articulated, by further elaboration within these specific settings.

5.44 The work of the GSP demonstrates strong support among employers for greater clarity, and for confirmation of the qualities that can be expected of those with degrees. Although many want to be assured that graduates possess directly employment-related qualities, they also wish to know the nature of the general academic and personal attributes that will be displayed by graduates from particular programmes. The development of effective means by which to identify the intended outcomes and specific features of degrees and other higher education qualifications – in terms accessible to non-academics – will make it easier for employers to decide whether graduates possess the skills and other qualities that they require for work.

Graduate standards and Key Skills

5.45 In addition to drawing on the body of research undertaken to identify the skills needed for employment, the HEQC has followed with close interest – and commented on – a development that has increasingly come to involve higher education: the development in England, Wales and Northern Ireland of work on Core Skills, now retitled Key Skills. It has also participated in the related discussion of Core Skills in Scotland arising from *Higher still*⁵. Many institutions have sought to ensure that all their students have the opportunity to acquire a certain number of general qualities, abilities or skills, which may go under various names. Sometimes these may match SQA's Core Skills or the NCVQ Key Skills. The latter are communication, application of number, IT, managing one's own learning, working with others, and problem solving (the first three of which are compulsory within GNVQs and all but problem solving are now accredited by NCVQ).

5.46 It has become evident that there are important parallels between the GSP and the Key Skills movement, despite the considerable differences of purpose between them. Both involve the encouragement of greater clarity and explicitness; both emphasise security of outcome; and both are concerned to provide information for employers, students and other interested parties that are clearer and more systematic.

5.47 In certain respects, the work of HEQC also complements that on Key Skills. By encouraging the academic community to make explicit the intended outcomes of programmes of study, it makes it easier to see the extent to which these match those needed for employment. It thus helps to clarify the form and nature of the qualities that higher education might want to foster in its graduates to enhance their employability.

5.48 It seems likely that the programme of action stemming from the GSP will both ease the more widespread introduction of Key Skills within higher education and foster a climate in which the relationship of these skills to the other outcomes of programmes is clearer and better articulated.

Overall outcome

5.49 As already noted, the specific focus of the Graduate Standards Programme, given to it by the CVCP, was to explore how broad comparability of standards might be achieved through the development of threshold standards and mechanisms for providing assurance of their achievement. As the work proceeded, however, it became evident that any movement towards threshold standards involved the prior attainment of two other objectives (supplemented and supported by measures to ensure greater consistency in the procedures relating to them). These are:

- the creation of a clear, publicly accessible vocabulary and coherent structures with which to

⁵Scottish Office, *Higher still: opportunity for all*. Scottish Office, 1994.

describe and plot the diversity of higher education; and

- the establishment of mechanisms to strengthen the exercise of shared academic judgement to provide greater security and comparability of standards within agreed boundaries.

6 THE WAY FORWARD

PRINCIPLES

6.1 The UK now has a mass higher education system. It is diverse and provides opportunities for life-long participation for a large proportion of the population. It offers a multiplicity of modes of learning.

6.2 The work of the GSP suggests that to articulate and assure standards in such a system, a new national framework is required. This would be designed to protect diversity and to sustain the value and currency of degrees within the context of institutional autonomy.

6.3 The framework would involve the establishment of a commonly agreed and understood set of dimensions with which to express the purposes and varied outcomes of higher education. This would make it possible for the full range of provision to be mapped, and ultimately, where needed, compared more easily and legitimately.

6.4 The framework would need to set boundaries for the system, which would be subject to regular review. They would require such measures as the definition of awards and credit, a typology of programmes, the strengthening of external examining, the improvement of programme validation, and the general introduction of transcripts. Such work at national level would be complemented by initiatives to strengthen and support institutions in the articulation and assurance of their standards through, for example, subject networks, training for assessors and the bench-marking of academic processes.

6.5 The GSP work envisages that both the articulation of standards and their assurance would be founded on a triangle of responsibility, between higher education institutions, subject and professional groups and the QAAHE, with contributions from students and employers where appropriate. This suggests strongly that the focus of external quality assurance must be on the effectiveness with which institutions determine their standards, and monitor and describe their achievement. These would be supplemented within the context of agreed frameworks, typologies and dimensions, and with support from various initiatives to strengthen peer judgement and academic practice. The new, integrated system of quality assurance must embody these principles if it is to be effective in protecting standards across higher education.

7 ACTION

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACTION NEEDED

7.1 The implications of putting these principles into effect are profound. To achieve them will require a great deal to be done at every level of higher education from that of a course, or module, team up to that of the system as a whole. It will also entail joint action between higher education institutions and such partners as subject association, PSBs, and bodies representative of employers and students. However, the actions needed will build upon much that has already taken place, or is about to take place; what is proposed goes with the grain of much of the best innovative practice in UK higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS ENDORSED

7.2 In the light of the various consultations on the draft report of the GSP the Higher Education Quality Council endorses the decision of the Graduate Standards Programme Steering Committee

to proceed with the recommendations (set out in detail in section 3 of Volume 2) listed below.

- Five actions to increase **clarity and explicitness** by:
 - i) promoting and supporting institutional explicitness about standards;
 - ii) agreeing to a range of dimensions against which the intended outcomes of degrees should be plotted;
 - iii) delineating a descriptive awards framework;
 - iv) providing a typology of programmes and means of profiling their intended outcomes;
 - v) agreeing a UK-wide system of student transcripts.
- Seven actions to increase **comparability and security and to strengthen academic judgement** by:
 - vi) ensuring that intended standards are given close attention in the design and approval of programmes;
 - vii) increasing the training and development opportunities for internal assessors and examiners;
 - viii) providing new fora in which examiners may review their practice and calibrate standards;
 - ix) strengthening external examining;
 - x) aligning assessment conventions and bench-marking practice;
 - xi) developing the use of archives and other data to evaluate standards;
 - xii) providing new opportunities for subject associations and PSBs to participate in the identification and review of standards.
- Two actions to progress work on **threshold standards** by:
 - xiii) ensuring that each institution clarifies its own threshold standards;
 - xiv) preparing a project specification for the review of the current honours degree and classification system.

OPTIONS REJECTED

7.3 HEQC rejects the following options:

- the development of national curricula and national assessment arrangements;
- the separation of teaching from summative assessment;
- an exploration of the use of external tests as an approach to threshold standards.

WORK IN PROGRESS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

7.4 Many of these actions are already beginning to take place. HEQC is engaged on work with institutions and other relevant partners to develop a typology of postgraduate awards (arising from the Harris Report), to clarify the relationships between credit, levels and awards, and to identify the means of recording student attainment. In addition, it is working to make explicit the intended outcomes of degrees in a representative sample of fields. This is being done in collaboration with subject associations, PSBs and institutions. HEQC is also developing a 'programme profiling tool' in partnership with institutional representatives and other interested parties, and has begun work on 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.

7.5 Besides the specific development work arising from the GSP, it will also be the task of the QAAHE to integrate the outcomes of the GSP into the new quality assurance arrangements. These will need to take account of and align the work of quality audit and quality assessment, professional accreditation and review, and external examining. (Details of the progress of HEQC's work so far on the recommendations is to be found in Section 4 of Volume 2.)

WORK IN PROGRESS WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

7.6 Most of the recommendations above require work as soon as possible within institutions where this is not already under way. All the recommendations require the support and detailed advice of institutions. HEQC recognises that a great deal has already been done or is being done. (Detailed examples of work by institutions relevant to the recommendations is to be found in Section 4 of Volume 2.)

7.7 HEQC intends to undertake a major programme of work to support institutions' implementation of the recommendations (and is confident that this will be carried forward by the QAAHE). This programme will include, for example, the drafting and dissemination of specific guidelines, the organisation of developmental networks around particular recommendations, and collaborative work with bodies representative of such other interested parties as subject associations, PSBs, employers and students. The Council will also seek (within its resources) to offer its staff as developmental consultants to work with individual institutions or groups of them, as was requested by higher education institutions in the consultation on the draft GSP report.

TIMESCALES

7.8 Some work at national level can be put in train quickly (for example, on an awards framework or on degree dimensions), but implementation of the recommendations directed to 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 political will (at national and local levels) and the resources available, particularly staff time. Current pressures on the time of academic staff and other resources were noted in many institutional responses.

RESOURCES

7.9 Hitherto, the Graduate Standards Programme has been funded predominantly from the resources of the HEQC (which are derived from institutional subscriptions) supplemented by grants from the DfEE and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit.

7.10 HEQC is now engaged in calculating in detail the resources needed to take forward the actions proposed above. These calculations will inform the planning of the budget 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 GSP consultation confirmed this, while in others, there is more to be done.

7.11 The cost of developing frameworks, instruments 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, and the training and re-training of 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 the development of subject networks. HEQC recognises that considerable funds will need to be provided to take forward the recommendations of the GSP. Some of these might be provided by the progressive diversion of resources now devoted to other forms of external quality assurance and enhancement.

7.12 It is clear that only slow and piecemeal progress will be made on carrying out the GSP recommendations if the work is not given priority in the allocation of resources at all levels.

GLOSSARY

(acronyms used in Volume 1 or Volume 2)

AAU: *Academic Audit Unit.* An agency of the CVCP that monitored quality arrangements in UK universities between 1990 and 1992.

AGR: *Association of Graduate Recruiters.* An association that consists of organisations that recruit and employ university graduates, or which offer services in connection with graduate recruitment.

BTEC: *Business and Technology Education Council,* see Edexcel Foundation.

CBI: *Confederation of British Industry.* A body that represents many of the large companies in the UK and that aims to put forward proposals on the future of UK business and on how the education system can best meet business needs.

CIHE: *Council for Industry and Higher Education.* A body consisting of heads of companies, universities and colleges. Its aim is to encourage industry and higher education to work together and represent joint thinking to Government.

CNAA: *Council for National Academic Awards.* The CNAA existed from 1964-1993 as the body charged with overseeing the quality and standards of what was then non-university higher education (polytechnics and colleges).

COSHEP: *Conference of Scottish Higher Education Principals.*

CSCFC: *Committee of Principals of Scottish Centrally Funded Colleges.*

CSU: *Higher Education Careers Services Unit.* A body that collaborates with careers services in higher education and is responsible for producing a range of expert publications and services in the area of graduate careers.

CVCP: *Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom.*

DENI: *Department of Education, Northern Ireland.*

DfEE: *The Department for Education and Employment.* This department resulted from the merger in 1995 of the then Departments for Education and of Employment.

EDEXCEL FOUNDATION: The body that resulted from the merger of BTEC (*Business and Technology Education Council*) and the University of London Examinations Board. Edexcel offers BTEC work-related qualifications and University of London Examinations and Assessment Council GCSEs and 'A'-levels.

GNVQ: *General National Vocational Qualifications.*

GMAT: *Graduate Management Admission Tests:* tests that are widely used in the USA and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere to select graduates for managerial training and employment.

GRE: *Graduate Record Examinations:* a test that, with others, is widely used in North America to select graduates for postgraduate study.

HECIW: *Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales.*

HEFCE: *Higher Education Funding Council for England.*

HEI: *Higher Education Institution.*

HEQC: *Higher Education Quality Council.* HEQC was set up in 1992 by the CSCFC, CVCP and SCOP to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of quality in UK higher education.

HESA: *Higher Education Statistics Agency.*

HHEW: *Heads of Higher Education in Wales.*

InCCA: *Inter-Credit Consortia Agreement.*

JPG: *Joint Planning Group.* A group set up in 1995 to develop proposals for a single quality assurance system for UK higher education to encompass the quality assessment activities of the English, Scottish and Welsh funding councils (plus Northern Ireland under HEFCE) and the work of HEQC. Its report in 1996 led to the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 1997.

NCVQ: *National Council for Vocational Qualifications.* (The work of the NCVQ is to be subsumed into the QCA in October 1997.)

NICAT: *Northern Ireland Consortium for Access and Transfer.*

NUCCAT: *Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer.*

OECD: *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.*

PSBs: *Professional and Statutory Bodies.*

QA: *Quality Assurance.*

QAAHE: *Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.* A body set up to integrate external quality assurance in UK higher education. It will take over all the functions of HEQC and the funding councils' quality assessment functions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and later Scotland. See JPG.

QAEN: *Quality Assurance and Enhancement Network.* A network (supported by HEQC) of UK higher education staff with institutional responsibilities concerning quality.

QCA: *Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.* A body that was set up in 1997 to embrace the work of SCAA and NCVQ. It is responsible for academic qualifications up to 'A'-level, GNVQs (which only exist at levels 1-3) and vocational qualifications at all levels (1-5). These responsibilities do not cover Scotland, where SQA performs similar, but not identical, functions.

QEG: *Quality Enhancement Group.* The group within HEQC that provides research and development services to support improvements in quality and standards in UK higher education.

RAE: *Research Assessment Exercise.* The process designed to assess the research performance of subject groups within UK higher education institutions. It is carried out every four years by the funding councils and is designed to guide the allocation of funding.

SAs: *Subject Associations.*

SCAA: *School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.* See QCA.

SCOP: *Standing Committee of Principals.* The organisation that represents the principals and directors of the colleges and institutes of higher education nationally.

SCOTCAT: *Scottish Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer.*

SCOTVEC: see SQA.

SEEC: *South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer.*

SHEFC: *Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.*

SQA: *Scottish Qualifications Authority.* This body oversees academic qualifications below degree level and vocational qualifications at all levels in Scotland. It resulted from the merger of SCOTVEC (*Scottish Vocational Education Council*) and the SEB (*Scottish Educational Board*). Unlike QCA it is also an awarding body.

TQA: *Teaching Quality Assessment.* This is carried out by the funding councils at present but is due to be taken over by QAAHE.

UGC: *University Grants Committee.* The funding body for the universities from 1919 to 1989 when it was replaced by the Universities Funding Council (UFC). In 1992 that, in turn, was disbanded and its responsibilities assumed by the English, Scottish and Welsh higher education funding councils and DENI in Northern Ireland.