

HEFCE 02/15

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Report

Information on quality and standards in higher education

Final report of the Task Group

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Information on quality and standards in higher education

Final report of the Task Group

To Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions
Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges

Of interest to those responsible for Quality assurance, Information management

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Executive summary

Purpose

1. As part of the revised method for quality assurance in higher education in England, a Task Group was set up to identify the categories of data, information and judgements about quality and standards of teaching and learning that should be available within higher education institutions (HEIs), and those which should be published. The Task Group, chaired by Professor Sir Ron Cooke, Vice-Chancellor of the University of York, published a document in November 2001, 'Information on quality and standards of teaching and learning: proposals for consultation' (HEFCE 01/66), setting out interim proposals and inviting

responses. This report gives the Task Group's final recommendations in the light of the consultation responses and wider discussions.

Key points

2. The Task Group's recommendations cover:
 - a. The main headings for collecting information about quality and standards of learning and teaching.
 - b. The quantitative data to be assembled and published by HEIs.
 - c. The qualitative information which should be published, including summaries of external examiner reports, outcomes of student satisfaction surveys, summaries of learning and teaching strategies, and outcomes of major programme reviews.
3. This report also includes:
 - a. An analysis of the responses to the interim proposals made by the Task Group in HEFCE 01/66, contained in Annex B.
 - b. Discussion of the changes to the interim recommendations which the group has made in the light of responses received.
 - c. The Task Group's conclusions on a number of outstanding issues which were not covered in HEFCE 01/66.
 - d. Recommendations on the format and method of publication of qualitative information.
 - e. Details of further work that will need to be undertaken before implementing the revised method for quality assurance in England.

Introduction and background

4. The joint HEFCE/UUK/SCOP/QAA¹ consultation document 'Quality assurance in higher education' (HEFCE 01/45), published in July 2001, set out proposals for a revised method for quality assurance in higher education in England.
5. The approach built on principles established in discussion with key partners about the operation of future quality assurance arrangements, namely:
 - a. Meeting public information needs, so that stakeholders – and above all students – can obtain information which is up-to-date, consistent and reliable about the quality and standards of teaching and learning at different HEIs.
 - b. Recognising the primary responsibility of each HEI to operate robust internal mechanisms for setting, maintaining and reviewing quality and standards; for generating information about its quality and standards; and for publishing the key parts of that information.
 - c. Lightness of touch, so that the burden on HEIs is reduced to the minimum consistent with proper accountability and meeting information needs, and so that the greatest value is secured from the resources used.
6. The responses to HEFCE 01/45 showed broad support for the proposed model. The analysis of responses is available on the QAA web-site at www.qaa.ac.uk. Notwithstanding that support, HEIs identified a number of areas of concern and issues for further consideration. The two main ones related to the nature of the reviews to be undertaken at subject level within a system based on institutional audit, and the expectations covering public information.
7. The new approach will test the availability within the HEI of information relating to quality and standards of teaching and learning. HEFCE 01/45 announced the setting up of a Task Group, representing the organisations concerned and the users of information, to identify the categories of data, information and judgements that should be available. The Task Group, chaired by Professor Sir Ron Cooke, Vice-Chancellor of the University of York, was asked to review, and prepare a report setting out recommendations on, the following:
 - a. The information about the quality and standards of teaching and learning which all HEIs should be expected, as a matter of standard good practice, to collect and have available within the institution for the purposes of setting, developing and monitoring quality and standards.
 - b. Which elements of that information should be published by all HEIs.

¹ The Higher Education Funding Council for England, Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals, and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

- c. What definitions should apply to secure consistency between institutions in assembling the information at sub-paragraphs a and b.
- d. What formats should apply in publishing the information at sub-paragraph b.
- e. The frequency of publication.

8. The Task Group's membership is listed at Annex A. Its interim proposals on the information about quality and standards of teaching and learning which HEIs should collect and have available, and the information which should be published, were set out in consultation paper 01/66 'Information on quality and standards of teaching and learning', published by the HEFCE in November 2001. For ease of reference, these proposals are set out at Annex B, with the responses to the consultation.

9. HEFCE 01/66 was sent to all HEFCE-funded HEIs and further education colleges (FECs), and a range of other interested parties. It was also issued for information to all higher education institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where separate discussions about quality assessment arrangements are under way. A total of 180 responses were received (including those from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). The consultation process concerned arrangements in England and this report deals with England only. The responses from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been sent to their respective funding bodies to inform continuing discussions with the QAA and with their HEIs.

Summary of final recommendations

10. This section sets out the categories of information which the Task Group recommends should be available within HEIs, and those which should be published. It is a revised version of the proposed list in Annex C to HEFCE 01/66, amended to take account of the consultation responses. It summarises the final outcome of the group's work, avoiding the need to refer back to the consultation document.

Information which should be available in all HEIs

11. The group recommends that the following information should be available in all HEIs.

a. Information on the institutional context:

- i. The HEI's mission statement.
- ii. Relevant sections of the HEI's corporate plan.
- iii. Statement of the HEI's quality assurance policies and processes.
- iv. The HEI's learning and teaching strategy and periodic reviews of progress.

b. Information on student admission, progression and completion:

- i. Student qualifications on entry.
- ii. The range of student entrants classified by age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability and geographical origin as returned to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
- iii. Student progression and retention data for each year of each course/programme, differentiating between failure and withdrawal.
- iv. Data on student completion.
- v. Data on qualifications awarded to students.
- vi. Data on the employment/training outcomes for graduates from the First Destination Survey (FDS).

c. Information on the HEI's internal procedures for assuring academic quality and standards:

- i. Information on programme approval, monitoring and review:
 - programme specifications
 - a statement of the respective roles, responsibilities and authority of different bodies within the HEI involved in programme approval and review
 - key outcomes of programme approval, and annual monitoring and review processes
 - periodic internal reports of major programme reviews
 - reports of periodic internal reviews by the institution of departments or faculties
 - accreditation and monitoring reports by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies.
- ii. Information on assessment procedures and outcomes:
 - assessment strategies, processes and procedures
 - the range and nature of student work
 - external examiners' reports, analysis of their findings, and the actions taken in response
 - reports of periodic reviews of the appropriateness of assessment methods used.
- iii. Information on student satisfaction with their HE experience, covering the views of students on:
 - arrangements for academic and tutorial guidance, support and supervision
 - library services and IT support
 - suitability of accommodation, equipment and facilities for teaching and learning
 - perceptions of the quality of teaching and the range of teaching and learning methods
 - assessment arrangements
 - quality of pastoral support.

- iv. Information and evidence available to teams undertaking HEIs' own internal reviews of quality and standards in relation to:
- the effectiveness of teaching and learning, in relation to programme aims and curriculum content as they evolve over time
 - the range of teaching methods used
 - the availability and use of specialist equipment and other resources and materials to support teaching and learning
 - staff access to professional development to improve teaching performance, including peer observation and mentoring programmes
 - the use of external benchmarking and other comparators both at home and overseas
 - the involvement of external peers in the review method, their observations, and the action taken in response.

Information for publication

12. The group recommends that the following information on quality and standards of learning and teaching at each HEI should be published.

a. Quantitative data:

- i. HESA data on student entry qualifications (including A-levels, access courses, vocational qualifications, and Scottish Highers).
- ii. Performance indicators and benchmarks published by the higher education funding bodies on progression and successful completion for full-time first degree students (separately for progression after the first year, and for all years of the programme).
- iii. HESA data on class of first degree, by subject area.
- iv. Performance indicators and benchmarks published by the higher education funding bodies on first destinations/employment outcomes for full-time first degree students.

b. Qualitative data:

- i. Summaries of external examiners' reports on each programme.

- ii. A voluntary commentary by the HEI at whole institution level on the findings of external examiners' reports.
- iii. Feedback from recent graduates, disaggregated by institution, collected through a national survey.
- iv. Feedback from current students collected through HEIs' own surveys, undertaken on a more consistent basis than now.
- v. A summary statement of the institution's learning and teaching strategy as presented to the HEFCE under the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund programme.
- vi. Summary statements of the results of, and the actions taken in response to, periodic programme and departmental reviews, to be undertaken at intervals of not more than six years.
- vii. Summaries of the HEI's links with relevant employers, how the institution identifies employer needs and opinions, and how those are used to develop the relevance and richness of learning programmes. These should be included as part of learning and teaching strategies (item v. above) and in individual programme specifications.

Analysis of responses, and changes recommended by the Task Group

13. Annex B contains a full analysis of the responses to the 16 questions posed in HEFCE 01/66. Where the majority of responses agreed with what was proposed, and no fundamental objections were identified on further reflection, the Task Group decided to confirm those proposals. They are included in the group's final recommendations (paragraphs 11 and 12 above) with no further commentary.

14. The responses also raised significant concerns and questions, which were considered further by the Task Group. Its conclusions are set out in the following paragraphs.

Information for publication

15. There was a concern from a significant number of HEIs that the proposals for publication of information appeared more prescriptive than they would wish, and would involve a greater burden. The Task Group takes that concern very seriously.

16. Throughout the Task Group's discussions, the guiding principle has been that the collection, analysis and publication of information should not become a major new burden. Wherever possible, the information should be drawn from existing sources, albeit in some cases with greater standardisation or using those sources to generate new summary information. Wherever possible, the content and format of the published information should be useful for the institution as well as for external stakeholders.

17. In two particular areas, the Task Group has changed its original proposals in order to respond to concerns about burden:

- a. It no longer recommends that summaries should be published of institutions' annual programme monitoring reports. The publication requirement would relate only to periodic major reviews of programmes or departments, undertaken at intervals no longer than six years.
- b. It no longer recommends that student feedback questions should be added to the FDS, in recognition of the concerns that this would distort the nature of that survey and substantially complicate the work of the staff who administer it.

18. Beyond that, however, the Task Group concluded that its proposals struck a proportionate balance between avoiding unnecessary burdens on HEIs while still securing that sufficient information is published in a consistent, accessible and robust form, to meet the needs of students, employers and other stakeholders. The group recognises that its recommendations will entail some additional work and expenditure. However, the information requirements must not be seen in isolation, but as an integral part of the wider approach to quality assurance. Given the decision to end comprehensive subject review, the overall burden of external quality assurance on HEIs will be substantially reduced, even if the

information element is somewhat increased. The Task Group believes that its proposals are thus consistent with the principle of lightness of touch.

19. Much of the information listed in paragraphs 11 and 12 is already available within HEIs, and some of it is already published. So a lot can be achieved by making more systematic use of what is already there.

HEI mission

20. Some respondents were concerned that the publication of standard quantitative information as proposed in HEFCE 01/66 might not take sufficient account of different institutional missions and circumstances. The Task Group was sympathetic to this view. It noted that, given the proposals to make the information available through the Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO) web portal in a way which connects with institutions' own web-sites and prospectuses, HEIs will be able to set the published information in context. In particular, there could be a link from the HEI's web-site to the 'institutional profile' for that HEI which is collected and published in standard format by the HEFCE. Additional detail on the proposed method of publication is provided below in paragraphs 56-62.

21. A related concern was that the recommended quantified datasets focus on full-time undergraduate students. This was seen as potentially giving a distorted picture of those institutions with large part-time and postgraduate populations. The reason for the recommendation relates to the calculation of the performance indicator benchmarks. Although a wider range of data exists about part-time and postgraduate students, the benchmarks published by the HEFCE currently focus on full-time undergraduate students. To ensure that differences in institutional mission and circumstances could be taken into account, the group thought it right to concentrate on those quantified indicators for which benchmarks were available.

22. But it will be open to HEIs to supplement the recommended core dataset with their own data on part-time and postgraduate students. Work continues on the HEFCE performance indicators, and the HESA dataset more generally, to broaden the categories of student covered. HEIs will be encouraged to include the wider dataset in the relevant sections of their own web-site if they are concerned that the recommended core data give a misleading impression of their institution.

Subject classification

23. The Task Group considered various possibilities for grouping information at broad subject area level, for those purposes where information was best reported at a level between the individual programme and the whole institution. In HEFCE 01/66 it recommended using the HESA Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) classification of 19 subject areas as striking the best balance.

24. Although that recommendation was supported by 60 per cent of respondents, issues arising from the consultation included:

- a. The need to clarify the relationship between the QAA's subject benchmarking categories and the JACS classification (since to date the subject benchmarks have been prepared using the QAA's own 42 subject area classification).
- b. The need to ensure that the JACS classification clearly locates all subjects somewhere within its broad subject area groupings.
- c. Concerns about the allocation of particular subjects to JACS subject groupings.

25. Hospitality studies, sports science, archaeology, anthropology, geography and psychology were cited in this regard as subjects which did not fit well within the current JACS descriptors.

26. After further consideration of the responses, the Task Group confirmed the recommendation to adopt the JACS classification system. It concluded that it was highly desirable to align with a classification system used for other data collection and publication purposes (the JACS classification is used by both HESA and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UCAS); and that using the 42 QAA subject areas would result in more detail than was necessary. However, further work is needed to address the concerns raised by HEIs about the allocation of particular subjects to JACS subject groupings, particularly to ensure that each subject appears under one heading only. The Task Group has invited HESA to pursue the concerns about attribution of subjects to subject areas as the standard JACS classification system evolves.

Information on assurance of quality and standards

27. The group had proposed that current students should be asked questions about the relevance of their course to further study and prospective employment. Responses showed that institutions were sceptical about this, believing that current students would not be in a position to make that judgement. The Task Group accepts the concern, and has therefore withdrawn this proposal.

External benchmarking and overseas comparators

28. Many respondents sought clarification of the group's suggestion that the information available to teams undertaking internal HEI reviews should include the use of external benchmarking and other comparators at home and overseas (see paragraph 11c sub-paragraph iv). The Task Group believes it is good practice for HEIs to ask themselves how they compare with similar HEIs in the UK and overseas; and that internal review teams should know how that is done within each department, what information is available, and how it is used. However, the group does not wish to prescribe how benchmarking and overseas comparisons should be undertaken. That is entirely for HEIs to decide.

Summaries of external examiners' reports

29. The group had proposed that summaries of external examiners' reports should be prepared by the examiners themselves, and published as a new form of public information. Full external examiners' reports would continue to be prepared as now, and would remain confidential between the examiner and the HEI.

30. Responses from HEIs showed that the higher education sector is divided on whether summaries should be published. But the proposal has been warmly welcomed by other major stakeholders as a crucial element in making the whole package credible.

31. After further discussion, the Task Group confirmed its recommendation to publish summaries of external examiners' reports, while leaving full external examiner reports confidential as now. It recognised the genuine concerns that requiring the preparation and publication of summaries could affect the existing relationship between HEIs and their examiners, particularly by compromising the openness and frankness of current reporting, and potentially creating an adversarial situation. Overall, however, the group concluded that this rich and comprehensive source of informed independent judgements would provide information of public value, and that summaries of external examiners' reports should therefore be published. In reaching that view, the group welcomed the work separately in hand by Universities UK and SCOP to review the operation of the external examiner mechanism, to see where it might be strengthened and made more consistent.

32. The Task Group discussed at length the format for summaries of external examiner reports. One model which was strongly advocated was to view 'summaries' as being analogous to the audit assurance of external auditors – that is, a basic formulaic statement that certain standard elements had been considered and judged satisfactory. Commentary would only be added where they were judged unsatisfactory. However, as with financial audits, this would probably result in summaries which were identical for the vast majority of programmes, and would do no more than identify the small minority of programmes that fell below acceptable standards.

33. The Task Group therefore decided to propose a template (at Annex C) which requires external examiners to provide succinct commentary for publication, as well as to confirm that standard elements have been considered and judged satisfactory. It will continue to be up to HEIs to agree with their external examiners the content and style of the full reports, which will remain confidential to the institution.

34. The group concluded that the unit for summary reports should be the individual programme. Thus where a single programme of study has two or more external examiners assigned to different modules or sections, there should be a single summary for the programme which combines the conclusions of the respective examiners. Where an HEI appoints a chief external examiner, it would be part of his or her role to bring together reports in that form.

35. Where, however, HEIs offer large modular programmes with multiple pathways, the approach should be to provide summaries for each major module and an overview summary from the chief external examiner. A summary aggregated to the level of the whole modular programme would not give students sufficiently detailed information to be useful. The group recognised that practice can vary substantially between HEIs in how they define modules, programmes and pathways, and that some standard definitions would be needed.

36. The group felt that more should be done to explain to those outside higher education how the external examiner system operates. It did not feel that each external examiner's summary report should comment on the evidence base and methods of working, because there would be so much overlap between reports. But there should be a statement on each HEI's web-site of its overall approach to the appointment and use of external examiners, with a link to individual examiners' summary reports for those wishing to know more.

Using the First Destination Survey to collect the views of recent graduates

37. The group had proposed adding some questions to the existing FDS to ask recent graduates their opinions of the quality and standards of their HE experience. The responses to HEFCE 01/66 confirmed the reaction already received to the HESA consultation on the development of the survey. Around 50 per cent of respondents rejected the proposal to extend the FDS to collect views of recent graduates. The Task Group accepted the concerns expressed that this would distort the nature of the survey and risk compromising current data collection methods. So that proposal has been withdrawn.

38. However, the Task Group confirmed its view that national and institutional surveys of student opinion should be undertaken. Publication of information from student feedback surveys – both a nationally administered survey of recent graduates, and institutionally administered surveys of current students – are essential elements of the overall package. This view is supported by a range of stakeholders. To keep the national survey within manageable limits while ensuring data validity, the group's expectation is that the results would not be disaggregated below the level of the whole institution.

39. A project managed by the HEFCE in collaboration with QAA, SCOP, UUK and the higher education funding bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will review current good practice by HEIs in collecting and using feedback from students on the quality and standards of their programmes. It will also advise on the design and administration of a national survey of recent graduates. The plans for this review are summarised in paragraph 64 below.

Publication of learning and teaching strategies

40. The Task Group had proposed publication of summaries of institutions' learning and teaching strategies. Some respondents said that it was difficult to respond on this issue without knowing the HEFCE's intentions in respect of any future funding programme involving the submission of learning and teaching strategies. Since publication of the consultation paper, the HEFCE Board has decided to continue the Teaching Quality

Enhancement Fund, which will include asking institutions to provide updated learning and teaching strategies. Accordingly, the Task Group confirms its recommendation to publish summaries of learning and teaching strategies (see paragraph 12b sub-paragraph v).

Publication of the results of annual programme monitoring and periodic major programme reviews

41. The group had proposed that HEIs should publish summaries of the results of their annual programme monitoring reviews, and of their periodic major reviews. The proposal relating to annual reviews prompted a lot of concern – particularly, that it would represent a major new burden which would add little value. Respondents noted that much of the information which would go into the summary of annual monitoring reviews is proposed for publication elsewhere: for example, data on progression and completion, first degree classification by subject area, summaries of external examiners' reports and institutional responses.

42. The Task Group concluded that the publication of summaries of annual monitoring reviews was unlikely to be productive, for the reasons adduced by respondents. The group therefore recommends publication of summaries only of periodic major programme reviews. This will address one of the significant concerns about extra burden for institutions. Where annual monitoring reviews do throw up significant issues leading to revisions of programme content or method, that should in any case be reflected in updated programme specifications.

43. The group considered what period should be defined for 'periodic' major reviews. It concluded that institutions should have maximum discretion to decide that for themselves, so that reviews could be co-ordinated with relevant activities: for example, with the cycles for accreditation reviews by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; or the six-year cycle for institutional audits. Overall, the group concluded that major reviews of programmes and departments should take place at intervals no longer than six years, and less wherever the institution concluded that that gave better alignment with other activities.

Employers' views

44. Respondents sought clarification on whether the Task Group was proposing publication of 'summary material on how the institution identifies employer needs and opinions' or 'summary material on employers' views on recent graduates they have recruited'. The former is the minimum requirement: in all cases, HEIs should summarise in programme specifications and learning and teaching strategies how they identify needs and opinions, and reflect them in the design and delivery of programmes (see paragraph 12b sub-paragraph vii).

45. Where HEIs have information on employers' views on the graduates they have recruited, it would seem helpful to include it. But that would be voluntary. The Task Group recognises that in many cases no such information will exist, nor could it usefully be collected in relation to programmes which do not lead to defined career routes.

46. Most respondents were supportive in principle of a national survey of employers' views, but a sizeable minority felt that these had been conducted in the past with little value accruing to the sector. This ambivalence is consistent with the group's own discussions: that in principle survey information of employers' views would be a good thing to have, but in practice it would be extremely difficult to collect the information in a meaningful or useful way.

47. The Task Group noted the differing views of respondents. Given the other priorities that have to be addressed, overall it concluded that a national survey of employers' views was unlikely to serve a useful purpose at this stage. Once the other elements of information collection and publication have become fully established, it may then be appropriate to revert to the question of collecting employers' views.

Further education colleges

48. The Association of Colleges expressed concern at not having been involved in the group's work. The HEFCE has held separate discussions with the association and a group of college representatives. As a result, a separate statement is being prepared of the HEFCE's overall approach to quality assurance of higher education in FECs.

Other issues, formats for publication, and next steps

49. In the course of its work, the Task Group identified a number of other issues which were not included in HEFCE 01/66, namely:

- a. The approach which should be taken to research degrees.
- b. Ways in which the recommendations in HEFCE 01/66 relate to collaborative provision.
- c. The types of benchmark it would be useful and feasible to produce at subject level.

Research degrees

50. The group felt that appraisal of the institution's approach to teaching and learning in relation to research programmes was an appropriate part of the overall institutional audit process. Research was already covered by the existing institutional review method (although not by subject-level review), and was included in the QAA code of practice. However, that did not imply that research programmes should therefore be covered by the information recommendations within the group's remit. The information relating to the quality and standards of teaching and learning on research programmes would be very different from that required for taught programmes, because of the prevalence of one-to-one supervision of research programmes.

51. The group therefore agreed that research programmes should not be included within its recommendations on information, which should be restricted to taught programmes. In the longer term, information about quality and standards on research programmes might be revisited, particularly given the growing proportion of taught material in many research programmes. Some information about research programmes is already published, such as completion rates for PhDs. Some specialist HEIs have a preponderance of postgraduate programmes which would need special consideration. But for the present the group decided to focus its recommendations about information exclusively on taught programmes.

Relationship to collaborative provision

52. The QAA code of practice includes a section on collaborative provision. The institutional audit method proposed will therefore cover, through consideration of that part of the code, students on franchised programmes in England (mostly franchises from HEIs to FECs). It was less clear to what extent overseas students would be covered. The Task Group felt that such students should be included where possible in the information about quality and standards. For example, students on overseas-delivered programmes should have external examiners assigned to their programmes, and so the group's recommendations on the use of external examiner reports should apply to them.

53. Overall, the Task Group felt that collaborative provision needed to be addressed in more detail in the final guidance issued by the QAA on the new method.

Performance indicator benchmarks at subject level

54. At present, the HEFCE performance indicators and associated benchmarks are published only at whole institution level. The Task Group believes that HEIs and external audiences would find it valuable if performance indicators and benchmarks could be disaggregated to subject level, using the 19 JACS subject areas.

55. Further work in this area would be undertaken by HESA and the HEFCE's Analytical Services Group and so would not represent a further burden to institutions. The HEFCE/HESA Performance Indicators Steering Group, which had overseen the development of the performance indicators and benchmarks to date, should be asked to consider the feasibility of disaggregation to subject level.

Formats for publication of qualitative information

Templates

56. Many respondents to the consultation paper urged that early consideration should be given to the format in which information would be published, and clarification of what 'published' actually means. The Task Group has considered these aspects. Templates setting out the framework for public reporting are at Annexes C, D and E.

Method of publication

57. The group recognised that publishing and distributing all the information envisaged in printed form would create an unmanageable burden for HEIs, and would not be useful for external audiences. So it concluded that web-based publication should be the norm. The options for web-site publication were discussed with HERO.

58. The information proposed comes from four sources: HESA, higher education funding bodies, individual HEIs and Higher Education Management Statistics (HEMS) reports. If the JACS subject area classification is adopted, it should provide a relatively straightforward data structure that would allow integration of data from the four sources.

59. HERO has advised that it would be reasonable for it to become the web gateway to that information. It would propose to disseminate the information for publication as follows.

60. Each HEI would create a section of its web-site to contain the required information. This would be in two parts, one set up as a secure intranet service for the internal information, the other containing the information for publication. A standard format and template would be agreed. Both sections should be in this format so that if additional information is published there will be no problems of compatibility. Quantitative data should be contained in an MS Excel spreadsheet and qualitative information should be in standard text format. Web addresses (URLs) would be assigned to each set of data and to sub-sets within these. The following hierarchy might apply: university or college web-site; section of information on quality and standards; dataset; subject area; and subject.

61. HESA, higher education funding bodies and HEMS also hold aggregated datasets for the whole sector. A similar hierarchy could be adopted by them to ensure common presentation of data. Data from these central organisations would be available in two ways: as an aggregated set from the organisation, and as data on an individual HEI presented on that HEI's site.

62. Access to this information could be obtained in two ways:

a. A link from the HERO home page to a new section main page. This would describe the project, the information that is available and how to obtain it. The URL for this page would be the one that is disseminated to publicise the availability of the service. The section main page would contain a search facility to provide the links to data held in HEIs and central organisations. The links would be accessed through a series of pull-down menus.

b. In the profile for each HEI held on HERO, an additional section would be added. This would be a link to the information section on the individual site and a series of links to the dataset level.

Further work

63. Additional work will need to be undertaken if the Task Group's recommendations are to be implemented. The following areas, in particular, will require significant development activity over the next few months.

Student feedback surveys

64. The Task Group has discussed the approach to commissioning advice on the design and implementation of a national survey, and a review of good practice in securing student feedback through HEIs' own internal systems. An invitation to tender has accordingly been issued.

QAA operational description and handbook

65. The QAA is developing its operational description of how the new framework would apply overall; and preparing a handbook for use by reviewers. That will be the route through which the Task Group's recommendations will be implemented, in that each institution's adherence to the information recommendations will be reviewed as part of the new form of institutional audit.

Strengthening the external examiner system

66. Induction training given to external examiners, the content and nature of the reports they are asked to provide, and the form of follow-up by the HEI all vary between HEIs. Practice also varies in respect of the appointment of external examiners. Given the new demands being placed on the external examining system in providing public information, and the central importance of the system in safeguarding standards, greater consistency is needed. Work is now in hand by Universities UK, SCOP and QAA to pursue these issues.

Data issues

67. Work will continue on the development of HEFCE performance indicators and benchmarks and the HESA dataset to embrace wider categories of student such as part-time and postgraduate students.

68. HESA has been invited to consider the concerns raised by HEIs during the consultation about the allocation of particular subjects to the JACS subject groupings.

Publication of information

Further discussions will be held with HERO on the best method of publishing the information through the HERO portal.