

HEFCE's response to the report of the Sub-committee for Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience

1. The HEFCE Board welcomes the report of the Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience (TQSE) sub-committee, which provides us with valuable information on the current state of quality and standards in the English higher education (HE) sector. While we are pleased that the sub-committee has found no evidence of a systemic failing in quality across the HE sector, we recognise that there do need to be improvements made. In particular we note:

- the need to ensure that the quality assurance system, in particular the institutional audit method and the role of the external examiner, are revised to meet current and future challenges
- the need to provide clearer and more accessible public information about HE
- the importance of maintaining public confidence in quality and standards.

2. Other recent reports have commented on challenges that face the quality assurance of HE. These include the 'thematic enquiries' report¹ written by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) on which the TQSE sub-committee drew for its own work, and the report of the Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills², which was published after the sub-committee concluded its work. These raise many similar concerns, and reflect an increasing public interest in the effectiveness of English higher education. We await the Government's response to the Select Committee's report.

3. The current cycle of QAA institutional audit ends in 2010-11. Current concerns will need to be taken into account in the revised method that will apply after 2011-12. We shall work with the sector to ensure any future system is robust and flexible enough to meet future challenges. Such a system should include not only reviews and audits carried out by the QAA, but also published information about HE and the wider academic infrastructure. We are aware that HEFCE cannot work in isolation on these important issues, but will need to work with the HE sector to agree the best way forward. Some work could have UK-wide implications.

4. We have begun work with Universities UK, GuildHE and QAA, with input from the Association of Colleges and the National Union of Students, to look at how the English quality assurance system might be improved. We are committed to a system based on autonomous institutions which are responsible for quality assurance and standards and in which the need for a continuous process of improvement and effective external audit are central. HEFCE and the other bodies are working to outline the principles that might underpin the development of the quality assurance system following the completion of the current cycle of audits. We intend to incorporate the recommendations of the sub-

¹ Available at www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries/default.asp

² Available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmduis/170/17002.htm

committee as far as possible. Views on these issues will be sought in a full joint consultation, to be launched in late 2009.

5. In the light of the outcomes from that consultation, more detailed proposals will be worked up. The QAA will publish a consultation on the detailed operation of the proposed audit method later in 2010.

6. The sub-committee identified the need for better information and guidance about all aspects of HE. We have invited tenders for a full review of the current information available. The review will include research into users' information needs, with the aim of developing more robust and comparable information. It will also consider our needs with regard to information about quality and standards. We intend this project to begin before the end of the year. This will be managed by the TQI/NSS steering group.

7. Other bodies are also taking forward work in response to the issues raised in the sub-committee's report. The sub-committee suggested that Universities UK and GuildHE should take forward a review of the external examiner system, and plans for this are under way. The QAA has begun a full evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure and is planning other work in response to the findings of its own thematic enquiries report. We will expect, along with other partner bodies, to be closely involved in these projects and ensure that work does not overlap.

8. There is now a clear programme of work under way to ensure that English higher education remains among the best in the world and that students and the public understand how this reputation is assured. It is important that the momentum of this work is not lost. The HEFCE Board will be active in working with the sector to bring improvements where they are needed and to monitor the progress of the various reviews and changes that are in hand.

9. We are committed to a quality assurance system which is accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public-facing. We want to tackle concerns about quality and standards and make real changes to improve the student experience and the reputation of HE. The work set out above, taken forward in partnership with the HE sector, will help us to achieve these goals.