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## **Title: What is quality assurance for? Paper 0107**

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### **Outline (1000 words)**

#### ***Context***

Providers of higher education in the UK are largely autonomous, self-governing bodies and many have the power to award their own degrees. They are responsible for managing their activities and have internal quality assurance arrangements which enable them to assure themselves that they are meeting their responsibilities. Guided by external frameworks, higher education providers are subject to external reviews. For the purposes of the reviews coordinated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the main guidance that is used is the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). The Quality Code incorporates and replaces the set of reference points that had been known as the Academic Infrastructure. Following an evaluation (QAA 2010) which considered the changes needed to keep the reference points fit for purpose the work towards the development of the Quality Code began in 2011.

The Academic Infrastructure was developed largely in response to recommendations made by the National Inquiry into Higher Education which reported in 1997 (otherwise known as the Dearing Report). Dearing identified with an increasing higher education sector there needed to be some shared reference points, if the value of higher education was to be retained and explained to a wider public. The Academic Infrastructure was the umbrella term given to those shared reference points. The reference points were developed by QAA working with representatives of those with interest and expertise in UK higher education, to provide a baseline against which standards and quality could be monitored and assured and now form the basis of the Quality Code.

The public interest in higher education has led to a drive for accountability and the development of methods designed to demonstrate quality in overt and measurable ways, (quality assurance processes). However, the creation of the content of the reference points which underpin the processes and their implementation at the interface of the student learning experience can, we argue, only be done by academic staff applying their expertise to the task. This is illustrated through the examples of the development of guidance for the external examiner system and the development of subject benchmark statements.

#### ***External examining***

In the UK external examining provides higher education providers with a degree of independent scrutiny over the conduct of assessment processes and provides a basis for the comparison of overall student performance for different qualifications. External examiners are appointed by individual universities, not by the State or government body, thus reflecting the university's autonomy for the academic standards of its awards. It is an important principle that external examiners are experts in their subjects; this reinforces the role of academic staff in maintaining academic standards as part of the quality of a student's learning experience.

In summer 2008, a number of events led to intense media interest in higher education and a continuing public debate about standards and quality. This led to a parliamentary Select Committee enquiry into 'Students and Universities'. QAA carried out its own investigation. (QAA 2009) Subsequently, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) carried out a review of their statutory responsibilities for quality assurance, (HEFCE 2009) and Universities UK and

GuildHE led a sector-wide review of external examining (March 2011). All these enquiries concluded that the external examiner system itself was largely sound, but there was a lack of understanding of the role of the external examiner beyond those directly involved in the process. Even though there were a number of policy developments between 2009 and 2011, the importance of the academic as expert acting as an external examining to maintain academic standards was not challenged; concerns being addressed in the developments were with the transparency of the system. The result was guidance was published by the QAA (2011) which became the definitive reference point for external examining Chapter (B7) in the Quality Code.

### ***Subject benchmark statements***

Subject benchmark statements describe what gives an academic discipline its coherence and identity, and defines what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills which illustrate understanding of and competence in the subject. Benchmark statements are developed by a group of subject experts representing the subject, and the UK higher education sector, as broadly as possible. They do not set a 'national curriculum' for a subject in higher education, but are intended to provide some degree of consistency, while not constraining, and perhaps even encouraging, creativity and innovation.

The evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure (QAA 2010) found that subject benchmark statements were generally thought to be useful. When they were first introduced, there was some opposition from academic staff and subject communities, but over time they have become more valued, largely because they were produced by experts in the subject area not staff from quality offices. This contributed to the sense of higher education sector ownership of the statements. It has been suggested that they provide an opportunity for subject communities to come together and debate the boundaries and characteristics of their subject, an opportunity which many had not previously had. In this way, the statements provide both a fixed reference point to compare against, but also encourage identification of where changes and improvements can be made in provision.

### ***Conclusion***

The process of developing guidance for external examining and the development of subject benchmark statements illustrate the core role of the academic as expert in ensuring quality in the student learning experience. This is part of a regulatory framework of quality assurance, which is necessary to meet the demands for assuring the public about the provision of the higher education sector. The model of this framework can only be considered mature if it is not seen as a tick box, monitoring, exercise but something in which experts can be engaged, and use to support their student's learning experiences. However, in a rapidly changing higher education environment, where demands for accountability and transparency are increasing, we ask, could this collegial, facilitated model be at risk?

[983 words]

### ***Background references***

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