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The Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee

The Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

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The current staff of the Committee are: Sarah Davies (Clerk); Glenn McKee (Second Clerk); Dr Christopher Tyler (Committee Specialist); Andrew Boyd (Senior Committee Assistant); Camilla Brace (Committee Assistant); Claire Cozens (Committee Assistant); Jim Hudson (Committee Support Assistant); and Becky Jones (Media Officer).

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Summary

The experience of the student is at the heart of higher education. Successive governments have successfully increased the numbers of students gaining a higher education qualification but debate has raged about whether this has resulted in a diminution of the quality of the student experience. At the beginning of this inquiry we set out to answer the following questions. How has the student experience changed? Is it getting better or worse? Are students getting value for money out of higher education?

As nearly everything universities do affects students this was a wide-ranging inquiry, covering everything from the decision to apply to university to the standards of the degrees awarded to students. We made a point of meeting, and seeking the views of, students in a wide range of institutions. We were also keen to carry out this inquiry in the run up to the review of tuition fees scheduled to start in 2009, to ensure that wider issues—than, for example, the amount by which fees should be allowed to rise—informed the debate, and throughout we put the student at the heart of what we did. We were also mindful of the review of higher education being conducted by the then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and believed our inquiry could help inform any future debate on higher education.

On the issue of student support introduced to mitigate the effect of variable fees, we found that the existing bursary arrangements were unsatisfactory and unfair. Students from identical backgrounds with the same financial need for support receive significantly varying bursaries depending on which university they attend. We call for a national system calculated on need to replace the existing arrangements. Such a system would widen the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education. We fully support widening participation in higher education. We also conclude that the sector should have arrangements that reduce the elements of randomness and chance in the admission process and help ensure students get a fairer deal on access to all universities.

We also identified three areas of particular concern. First, the system in England for safeguarding consistent national standards in higher education institutions is out-of-date, inadequate and in urgent need of replacement. The current arrangements with each university responsible for its own standards are no longer meeting the needs of a mass system of higher education in the 21st century with two million students. Given the amount of money that the taxpayer puts into universities it is not acceptable, as we found during our inquiry, that Vice-Chancellors cannot give a straightforward answer to the simple question of whether students obtaining first class honours degrees at different universities had attained the same intellectual standards.

The body that currently "assures quality", the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), focuses almost exclusively on processes, not standards. This needs to change. We call for the QAA to be transformed into an independent Quality and Standards Agency with a remit, statutory if necessary, to safeguard, monitor and report on standards.

Second, we were surprised by the lack of consistency across the higher education sector. There is much good practice, indeed excellence, in the sector but it was not easy to establish

whether it is consistently applied. We are clear that cross-sector arrangements are required and will benefit students and prospective students. We therefore call for codes of practice—to be followed by all institutions in receipt of public funds—on, for example, admissions, and also on access information to ensure that universities present information in a consistent format to allow prospective students to make informed decisions. As one mature student pointed out to us: "Getting a clear idea of the hours involved and when lectures would be was incredibly important to me because of child care".

In addition, we call on the Government to take immediate steps to introduce a credit transfer system which will allow credit earned in one institution to be transferred to another and portability of credits between tertiary education institutions in England—that is, between further and higher and among different higher education institutions.

Third, the treatment of part-time and mature students needs to be improved. The failure of the current system to treat them on the same basis as full-time students aged between 18 and 21 is in effect a form of discrimination that is not only wrong but also hinders the achievement of the Government's objective of 40% of all adults in England gaining a university qualification by 2020. The forthcoming review of fees needs to examine all aspects of support for part-time and mature students.

There also needs to be a change of culture at the top in higher education. At several points we encountered what could be characterised as defensive complacency. We found no appetite whatsoever to investigate important questions such as the reasons for the steady increase in the proportion of first class and upper second class honours degrees over the past 15 years or the variation in study time by students taking the same subjects at different universities. We also have concerns that the protections for whistle-blowers within universities are inadequate. Nor did we find any interest in testing the assumptions that pervade the sector—for example, that there is a link between carrying out research and the quality of teaching. We found some of the justification for the current arrangements wholly unconvincing. The most glaring was that it was possible to justify academic standards with a market mechanism.

Towards the end of the inquiry the Prime Minister reorganised Whitehall creating the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which will have responsibility for higher education. As a consequence select committee scrutiny of higher education will shift on 1 October to our sister committee, the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. As this is therefore now a valedictory report we have framed our conclusions and recommendations in a wider manner than we had intended when we embarked on the inquiry. For example, we heard about the part that further education colleges play in widening participation in, and providing, higher education and this is an area we may well have examined further in a subsequent inquiry. On the evidence we took in this inquiry we expect further education colleges to play a crucial role in the development of higher education and in meeting the Government's 2020 objective.

The challenge for the next decade for the higher education sector will be to develop consistency in practice and standards and much greater openness and transparency.

1 Introduction

Higher education in England

1. The student experience of university,[1] like the sector itself, varies widely. There are 90 universities in England, and this figure increases to 133 if other higher education institutions are included.[2] All are autonomous institutions and undertake research and teaching, although the "mission focus" and balance of activities varies. Some institutions concentrate primarily on teaching while others are more research intensive. In addition, 286 of the 387 general and specialist further education colleges in England received direct or indirect funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2006 –07.[3]

2. The 1963 Robbins Report on Higher Education noted that higher education had not been planned as a whole and considered that what system of higher education there was in the UK "has come about as the result of a series of initiatives, concerned with particular needs and particular situations".[4] Since the 1960s the initiatives have continued. The latest wave of expansion started in 1992 when the former polytechnics and colleges of higher education became universities. Since 1997 expansion has continued with student numbers in England rising from 1.5 million in 1997 to 1.9 million in 2007[5] (and see table at paragraph 3). In 1998 the Government introduced tuition fees and a significant change occurred in 2006 when the Government allowed tuition fees to vary between higher education institutions. The result of these waves of change is that universities in England share a number of the characteristics of some English cities where there has never been an overall plan and development has been piecemeal: there is a medieval centre and, starting in the Victorian era, phases of development and expansion. Yet the public perception of

1 We have used the terms "university" and "higher education institution" interchangeably throughout this report. Other than where explicitly stated, neither term includes higher education provided in further education colleges.

2 As at August 2008 according to Universities UK. Federal institutions such as the University of London are counted as one university. This list excludes foreign higher education institutions operating in the UK. The Open University operates in all the countries of the UK; its headquarters is based in England. There are also a significant number of further education colleges at which higher education students study; they are not included in the 133.

3 "Supporting higher education in further education colleges Policy, practice and prospects", HEFCE 2009/5, p 8

Higher education is provided in further education colleges in three broad ways:

- Prescribed courses of higher education directly funded by HEFCE. The types of courses are set out in legislation and students must be signed up for the whole course, not just a module.
- Indirectly via a higher education institution—where students are registered with the higher education institution, but some or all of the teaching is carried out at a further education college through a sub-contracting or franchise arrangement. As the HEFCE block grant goes to the higher education institution there is more flexibility over what can be done with the money and hence higher education modules carried out in further education colleges can be funded this way.
- Non-HEFCE funded or non-prescribed higher education—Level 4 courses undertaken at a further education college funded either by the Learning and Skills Council or through fees paid by the student or their employer.

In 2008–09 there were 46,930 FTE students who were on (directly) HEFCE-funded courses in further education colleges in England; 4.0% of the total (*Notification of grants to institutions, 2008–09 Student numbers from HESES and HEIFES,* HEFCE, March 2009).

4 Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education,* Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961–63 (the "Robbins Report"), October 1963, Cmnd. 2154, para 18

5 Ev 438 (Universities UK), para 13

the town focuses on its traditional centre or, in the case of universities, on Oxford and Cambridge as the exemplar.

3. We noticed that issues faced by both the Robbins Committee and the subsequent major inquiry into higher education chaired by Sir Ron Dearing[6] in 1997 still remain current: funding, though now made more complex with tuition fees and state supported student loans; balancing historic autonomy and freedom with accountability in the use of public funds; meeting national needs for skills; and improving academic professionalism. But some things have changed: universities are having to secure an increasing proportion of their income through their own entrepreneurial activities; more students are studying part-time (see table below) and increasing numbers are returning, or entering university, as mature students; there is now a perception that students are making increasing demands as "customers"; universities are competing for students, especially international students; and—in the short term—the economy is in serious recession. At the heart of higher education is the student and this is the perspective we have chosen for this Report.

6 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Report of the National Committee*, (the "Dearing Report"), July 1997

Table 1: All students on higher education courses at higher education institutions, by level and mode[7]

	Undergraduate		**Postgraduate**		
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Total HE
All UK HEIs					
1996–97	997,661	394,946	140,909	222,663	1,756,179
2007–08	1,232,005	572,965	248,380	252,755	2,306,105
% increase	23%	45%	76%	14%	31%
English HEIs					
1996–97	807,138	352,459	115,729	183,358	1,458,684
2007 –08	1,011,955	493,060	206,865	210,300	1,922,180
% increase	25%	40%	79%	15%	32%

4. When we started our inquiry in 2008 the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) was the government department with responsibility for higher education. In June 2009 DIUS merged with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to become the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which now has responsibility for higher education.

5. In 2009–10 BIS will be responsible for total departmental spending of £15 billion[8] on higher education, about half of which will be spent via HEFCE. Across the UK, the higher education sector operates on an annual turnover of over £17 billion and employs 340,000 people.[9] According to Universities UK, economists have estimated that (both directly and indirectly) UK higher education institutions stimulated activity in 2003–04 that was worth £42 billion to the economy, plus over £3.6 billion in export earnings.[10] Institutions' sources of income have broadened almost across the board with core government funding providing less than half the total,[11] and record numbers of undergraduate students are applying to enter higher education institutions every year—344,000 applicants from England were accepted for entry in 2008.[12]

7 "Students and Qualifiers Data Tables", HESA, www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_datatables&Itemid=121&task=show_category&catdex=3

8 DIUS, *Departmental Report 2009*, Cm 7596, July 2009, p 61

9 Universities UK, *The Economic Impact of Higher Education Institutions*, May 2006, pp 19 and 16; the figures relate to 2003–04.

10 Universities UK, *The Economic Impact of Higher Education Institutions*, May 2006, p 30

11 DIUS, *Investing in our Future: Departmental Report 2008*, Cm 7392, May 2008, p 68

12 "Final figures for 2008 entry-10.4% rise in accepted applicants" UCAS press release, 15 January 2009

Machinery of Government changes: June 2007

6. When, in June 2007, the Government created DIUS, it took a radical step by removing higher education from the former Department for Education and Skills to have post-19 year-old education in DIUS and pre-19 education in a separate department, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The reorganisation in June 2009 has perpetuated the separation with higher education joining further education, innovation, skills, science, business and regulatory reform in BIS. In configuring universities with innovation and skills the Government had a clear objective. The then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Rt Hon John Denham MP, explained on taking up the post in June 2007 that bringing "together these key elements [skills, scientific research and innovation] will help Britain stay at the forefront of the global economy in an increasingly competitive world". He explained that the "mission" of DIUS was "to ensure every person in this country has the opportunity to reach their full potential and highest ambitions".[13] The Government has a target arising from its acceptance of the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills:[14] of 40% of all adults in England gaining a university qualification by 2020[15] (see paragraph 142 and following).

Framework for higher education

7. In a speech on 29 February 2008, John Denham announced his intention to develop a framework for higher education over the next ten to fifteen years. He explained:

> The world is evolving very quickly and we must be able to unlock British talent and support economic growth through innovation as never before.
>
> We need to decide what a world-class [higher education] system of the future should look like, what it should seek to achieve, and establish the current barriers to its development.[…] I want to do this before we initiate the review of undergraduate fees next year.
>
> As part of this process I am inviting a number of individuals and organisations to make contributions. Not to write government policy but to help inform it and—equally important—to stimulate debate and discussion in the sector.[16]

When he gave evidence to our inquiry on the DIUS Departmental Report on 29 October 2008 Mr Denham told us:

> the big question […] is: how do we ensure that our university system is world-class in 15 years' time? I believe it to be world-class today and for the whole university provision we want to be that good in 15 years' time. As part of that process, we looked at areas first where policy had not been looked at recently and we invited people from within the university sector, mainly vice chancellors, to produce think

13 "New Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to push Britain forward", DIUS Press Release, 28 June 2007

14 HM Treasury, *Leitch review of skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy—world class skills*, Final Report, 2006

15 DIUS, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*, Cm 7181, July 2007, p 9; DIUS, *Investing in our Future: Departmental Report 2008*, Cm 7392, May 2008, p 68

16 "Higher Education", Speech delivered by Rt Hon John Denham, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 29 February 2008, at www.dius.gov.uk/news_and_speeches/speeches/john_denham/higher_education

> pieces, provocative pieces about international higher education, about the quality of the student experience.[17]

In all, 17 pieces of work were produced and have now been published.[18]

8. When during this inquiry Mr Denham gave evidence on 11 May 2009 we asked him when he would announce his conclusions. He said that the current plan was to "produce the forward looking [higher education] framework in the summer" and then after that he would be launching the independent review of fees and of funding.[19] He explained that:

> the basic idea was that the framework should set out the forward looking broad vision for higher education so that this time, when people come to look at funding issues, there is hopefully some sense of what it is we are trying to fund rather than trying to deal with the question of funding in the abstract without debating what sorts of universities, what their role is going to be, how they are going to develop in the future.[20]

9. Mr Denham added that once the debate on fees was initiated "nothing else will ever be discussed".[21] We welcome the Secretary of State's approach and agree that the debate about fees needs to be put into the wider context, both of the purpose and structure of higher education in England, but also from the perspective of the student. We see our inquiry and report as contributing to this wider debate. **We support the approach of the former Secretary of State, John Denham, in examining the function and structure of higher education ahead of reaching decisions on funding. We regret, however, that the Government did not initiate and complete the examination of the function and structure of higher education in time to allow the review of fees to be completed in 2009 and therefore ensure the matter is fully aired in the run up to the next General Election.**

17 Third Report of Session 2008–09, *DIUS's Departmental Report 2008* , HC 51–ii, Q 149

18 The commissioned contributions covered:
- International issues in Higher Education
- Academia and public policy making
- Understanding Higher Education institutional performance
- Part-time studies and Higher Education
- Teaching and the student experience
- Research careers
- Demographic challenge facing our universities
- Intellectual property and research benefits
- World leader in e-learning
- Universities' links with schools in STEM subjects.

A series of reports were also commissioned from users of higher education, employers in a variety of sectors:
- Nicholas Hytner, Director of the National Theatre
- Tom Russell, head of the London Development Authority's Olympic Legacy Directorate
- Sir John Chisholm, Chair of QinetiQ and the Medical Research Council
- Professor Ann Close, National Clinical Advisor to the Healthcare commission
- Marjorie Scardino, Chief Executive of Pearson
- John Griffith Jones, Joint Chairman of KPMG.

In addition, The National Student Forum provided an informal response to the first stage of the debate on the future of higher education.

See BIS website, www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/shape_and_structure/he_debate

19 Q 496

20 *As above*

21 Q 500

10. DIUS's final Departmental Report, published by BIS after the merger of the departments confirmed that the debate initiated by Mr Denham will result in "the publication of a new [higher education] framework for England setting out a vision for higher education over the next 10 to 15 years" and that this "framework will also set the context for the review of university fees which will begin later in 2009".[22] **We recommend that in responding to this Report the Government set out a detailed timetable for publishing the higher education framework.**

Future scrutiny of higher education

11. Towards the end of our inquiry, as we have noted, the Prime Minister reorganised Whitehall and moved DIUS in its entirety into a new department, BIS. This means that, following changes to its Standing Orders agreed by the House of Commons on 25 June 2009,[23] our Committee will cease to scrutinise higher education from 1 October 2009. More importantly, it raises questions over the future of higher education policy, an issue which we take forward in the conclusions to this Report and to which we trust our successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education will return to in due course. As we have drafted our Report we have identified a number of areas that our successor committee may wish to review. For ease of reference we have listed these areas in Annex 2 to this Report. There are, however, two matters we should raise here. First there are two matters that fall outside the scope of our inquiry. **Two areas our successor committee might find rewarding to examine are: international students and postgraduate students, including those studying for masters degrees and also including the terms under which universities require postgraduate students to teach undergraduates. We have deliberately kept our focus on the undergraduate.**

Demand for places in higher education institutions in 2009

12. Second, towards the end of our inquiry a potential problem emerged because of the demand for places in higher education in 2009. When he appeared before us on 29 October 2008 Mr Denham announced that the Government's plans for the expansion of the number of student places would be reduced from 15,000 to 10,000 places for 2009.[24] The reduction raised for us a question about the achievement of the *Leitch* target,[25] though, when he gave evidence to us in May 2009, Mr Denham explained that the Government had "worked very hard to enable a further expansion of student numbers for 2010-11 to maintain [the] trajectory".[26] He added:

> We have put […] funding in and we have confirmed an additional 10,000 [places] for 2010-11 […] The balance that I have to strike is […] between the funding that we

22 BIS, *Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills: Departmental Report 2009*, Cm 7596, July 2009, para 2.9

23 *Votes and Proceedings*, 25 June 2009, p 686

24 HC Deb, 29 October 2008, col 33WS; see also Third Report of Session 2008–09, *DIUS's Departmental Report 2008* , HC 51–ii, Qq 142, and 169.

25 See para 6.

26 Q 509

> put in and not allowing so much unplanned expansion that the funding gets spread too thinly.[27]

13. In a memorandum in June 2009 UCAS[28] told us that:

> The number of applicants for 2009 entry in the main undergraduate scheme operated by UCAS, ie that for full-time, undergraduate students, stood at [522,550 for England] on 8 June compared with [477,324] at the same point for the 2008 entry cycle. This represents an increase of […] 9.5% [for England]. This constitutes a significant increase in applications, and growth which is very much higher than the year on year trends evidenced over the last ten years. […] HEFCE has informed us that, in practice, for 2009 additional student numbers in respect of full-time, under-graduate, programmes translate into the number of last year's intake (around 419,000), plus an additional 3,000 places (ie an increase of less than 1% compared to the intake for 2008 entry). These figures suggest that there will be a projected reduction in places available during Clearing for 2009 entry (<18,000 places compared with c44,000 last year) of >25,000.
>
> [UCAS's projections suggest] a rather more uncertain situation for Confirmation and Clearing 2009 in comparison with recent years. There are likely to be disappointed applicants who are unable to find a place in Clearing.[29]

14. UCAS's concerns indicated that demand for places in higher education institutions might significantly exceed supply and we therefore raised this matter with HEFCE and the current Secretary of State for Business, Innovations and Skills, the Rt Hon the Lord Mandelson. The Chief Executive of HEFCE, Sir Alan Langlands, replied on 24 June 2009 explaining that of the allocation of Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) for 2009–10:

> 4,805 were full time and 5,148 part time. The full time figure of 4,805 includes an estimate of 3,000 additional first year entrants. The balance will accommodate second or subsequent cohorts to new or expanded courses that we have supported in earlier years. For example, if an institution is supported to develop a new three-year degree course, we would expect an increase in new entrants in the first year. If entrant levels are to be maintained, the institution is likely to need additional places in years two and three to support subsequent cohorts until student numbers across all three years of study reach a steady state.[30]

This is not clear. **We recommend that in responding to this Report the Government provide a detailed breakdown of the 4,805 full-time places (Additional Student Numbers) announced in October 2008, in particular how 1,800 ASNs were required for year two and three students.**

27 Q 511

28 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

29 Ev 534–35

30 Ev 534

15. On the day that we formally agreed this Report the Chairman received a letter from the Secretary of State[31] and the Government made a Written Ministerial Statement about the future funding of student support. The Statement announced that:

> an extra 10,000 higher education places will be made available to universities this year to support more students in going to higher education this year.
>
> The Government will pay the student support costs for extra places in courses related to the new industry, new jobs agenda such as science, technology, engineering and maths—areas which will equip young people with the skills they need for the jobs of the future.
>
> The package will fund the financial support for these students, which includes, for full-time students the fee loans to cover the cost of the tuition fees charged by institutions.
>
> Institutions wishing to take additional students will be able to charge students on full-time courses in England up to £3,225 in tuition fees in 2009–10, the same as for other students. A tuition fee loan is available to eligible students to cover the full cost of the fee.
>
> No additional teaching grant from HEFCE will accompany these additional students. It is for universities to manage their own admissions and we are confident that many will want to offer high quality places to students on this basis.[32]

16. The letter added:

> The students we have announced funding for today are fees only they do not attract teaching grant and of course it will be entirely a matter for universities to judge whether they want to offer places to students on a fees-only basis: not all will choose to do so. But we know from discussions with the sector that there are institutions who will be able to recruit such students without compromising the quality of their offer.[33]

17. We have three specific points. First, the manner in which Mr Denham presented the original 10,000 “additional places” in October 2008 was less than clear. The reasonable construction that an observer would put on his statement was that there would be 10,000 places for new entrants to university, whereas the new places announced at that time boil down to 3,000 extra places for full-time new entrants. **We recommend that in making future statements about the provision of additional places in higher education the Government provide a breakdown between full-time and part-time places and state clearly how many of the additional places will be available for new entrant, first-year undergraduates.**

18. Second, as the recession reduces employment prospects and those who have been made redundant seek to enter higher education, in order to learn new skills, demand for higher

31 Ev 536

32 HC Deb, 20 July 2009, col 87WS

33 Ev 537

education places appears to be rising. **We did not have the opportunity to take evidence on the Government's Written Ministerial Statement made in July 2009. While we welcome a potential increase in student numbers, these measures do not appear to meet all our concerns and have the potential to set an unfortunate precedent in that no additional teaching grant is being made available, particularly for science subjects where the costs are higher. Moreover, in our view, the pressure caused by the strong increase in demand for places in higher education in 2009 may still require the attention of our successor committee later in the year, after this year's A-level results are published, and we therefore flag this up as an issue for our successor committee.**

19. Third, in our view the policy which the Government set out in *Science and innovation investment framework 2004–2014: next steps*—that making progress on the supply of high-quality STEM[34] graduates is essential "if the Government's overall ambitions for UK science and innovation are to be realised"[35]—holds good. **We therefore welcome that part of the Written Ministerial Statement which states that the "Government will pay the student support costs for extra places in courses" related to the agenda set out in the policy statement "Building Britain's Future—New Industry, New Jobs" (20 April 2009) such as science, technology, engineering and maths. We agree that new places in higher education should meet the strategic needs of the country for STEM graduates, subject to our concerns in the previous paragraph.**

20. The provision and education of STEM graduates raises wider issues beyond the funding of places in universities which include the teaching of STEM subjects in school and careers advice through to the autonomy of higher education institutions in respect of the extent to which the Government can and should manage or direct the supply of courses across the higher education sector essential to deliver the *Leitch* target.[36] **We highlight the provision and education of STEM graduates as an issue for our successor committee, and also it may be an issue that we examine as part of our revised remit of scrutinising science and technology across government.**

The evidence

21. We issued a call for evidence on 30 October 2008 for our inquiry into students and universities and suggested that submissions address a range of issues: admissions, the balance between teaching and research, degree completion and classification and mechanisms of student support and engagement.[37] We received 121 written submissions, which we accepted as evidence to the inquiry. We are grateful to all those who submitted written evidence.

22. While we received ample and informative written evidence from universities, academics, and other interested parties, including the National Union of Students (NUS)[38]

34 Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

35 HM Treasury, Department of Trade and Industry, Department for Education and Skills and Department of Health, *Science and innovation investment framework 2004–2014: next steps*, March 2006, para 1.6

36 See para 6.

37 "Students and Universities", Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee Press Notice No. 82 (07–08), 30 October 2008

38 Ev 261

and two student bodies,[39] we did not receive many submissions from individual students. Recognising that the usual methods which select committees employ to invite and collect evidence might not reach, or be attractive to, students, we therefore took a number of additional steps to gain their views and feedback.

- We carried out an e-consultation targeted at undergraduates.[40]
- We contacted a number of students directly through their representative bodies to invite them to give oral evidence at the beginning of February.
- We asked those students who appeared before the Committee in February to review the evidence and we invited them back to give further oral evidence in April. See paragraph 27 below for details.
- When we visited universities in Liverpool and Oxford, as well as taking oral evidence on the record from students, we met groups for informal discussions. In addition, the Chairman made a visit as a rapporteur to Imperial College London to meet students and staff.

23. We are grateful to all those who gave oral evidence (part of which was taken by a dedicated Sub-Committee) during this inquiry. We were particularly pleased to visit, and take evidence at, Liverpool Hope University and Oxford Brookes University and to visit the University of Oxford. We thank those who arranged and participated in these informative and valuable visits. Transcripts of the oral evidence sessions are published alongside this Report, together with written evidence submitted to the inquiry. In drafting this Report, we also benefited from the notes of the informal meetings with students at Liverpool Hope University,[41] the University of Oxford[42] and Imperial College London[43], which we have published.

39 Ev 217 (Birkbeck Students' Union), and 269 (Open University Students Association)

40 A note summarising points from the consultation is at Ev 166. The consultation ran for six weeks from 23 February and closed on 7 April 2009. The forum asked for views on six topics and each received the following number of replies (or posts).

Topic	Posts
Why did you decide to apply to university?	29
Do you think that the admissions process for universities is fair?	34
What factors influenced your choice of university and course?	31
Has university lived up to your expectations?	32
What do you think of the quality of teaching at university?	41
Are all degrees the same?	29

41 Ev 160

42 Ev 161

43 Ev 158

24. We also visited Washington DC, where we met Federal officials with responsibilities for higher education, the American Council on Education, staff at the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, staff and students at Georgetown University, staff at the University of California Washington DC Office, the Center for International Science and Technology Policy, George Washington University, and the North Virginia Community College. In addition, one of our members, Mr Gordon Marsden MP, visited and met staff and students at Howard University in Washington DC.

25. We found it useful to be able to see at first hand, and talk to, students and staff at universities in the USA, which has a higher education system with many similarities to that in England and faces many of the same issues. All of the students we met at Georgetown University in the USA had studied in the UK and many of the staff at the higher education institutions we visited had also studied or taught in the UK and so were able to compare the higher education systems in both countries. We are conscious, however, that there are differences—for example, as Professor Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, pointed out, the unit of resource per student for an American student is approximately double that available in the United Kingdom[44]—so care has to be taken in drawing comparisons.

26. Our special advisers for this inquiry were Professor Ronald Barnett, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education, Institute of Education, University of London, Bahram Bekhradnia, Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), and Professor Sue Law, Head of Research, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, Coventry University. We are very grateful for their assistance.

27. We held nine oral evidence sessions, seven at Westminster and two at the universities we have mentioned. We took evidence from 70 witnesses, of whom 29 were students. As already noted, as an innovation, in order to ensure we obtained a full perspective from the students, we asked those students who gave oral evidence on 9 February at the beginning of inquiry if they would later be prepared to read the evidence and come back for a follow-up session. We were pleased that five students—Ricky Chotai, Lucy Davidson, Carrie Donaghy, Gemma Jerome and Anand Raja—were able to either return to give evidence as a panel, on 29 April, or provide written submissions.[45] We thank them for their assistance and comments.

28. In addition to students and their representative bodies—the National Union of Students, the Birkbeck College Students' Union and the Open University Students Association—we took oral evidence from:

a) organisations representing higher education institutions: Universities UK[46] and GuildHE[47] as well as the 157 Group,[48] the 1994 Group,[49] Million+,[50] the Russell Group[51] and the University Alliance;[52]

44 Q 425

45 Ev 520, Ev 521

46 Universities UK represents the executive heads (Vice-Chancellors or Principals) of UK universities and colleges of higher education. It currently has 133 members.

47 GuildHE is one of the two formal representative bodies for Higher Education in the UK, the other is Universities UK.

b) several current and former Vice-Chancellors: Professor Michael Arthur, Leeds, Professor Janet Beer, Oxford Brookes, Professor Michael Brown, Liverpool John Moores, Professor Roger Brown, Southampton Solent, Professor Michael Driscoll, Middlesex, Dr John Hood, Oxford, Professor Gerald Pillay, Liverpool Hope and Professor Jon Saunders, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Liverpool;

c) the University and College Union (UCU), which represents academics and other staff in higher education institutions;

d) organisations and academics studying or developing the higher education sector: ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange), the Heads of Education and Development Group (HEDG), the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Higher Education Achievement Report Implementation Group, the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) and Professor Geoffrey Alderman, Professor Roger Goodman, Professor Bernard Longden, Professor Lin Norton, Professor Alan Ryan and Professor Mantz Yorke;

e) the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA);

f) UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service);

g) organisations representing employers: the CBI, the Engineering Council UK (EC^{UK}), the Institute of Directors (IoD) and SEMTA;[53] and

h) Rt Hon John Denham MP, then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE.

29. Our aim has been to invite and seek evidence across the higher education sector and we hope that we achieved this objective. We found this at times a delicate process and were surprised at the vigilance shown by some of the organisations representing groups of institutions within Universities UK in their endeavour to ensure that their higher education institutions were fully represented and the organisation's status was fully recognised. We found it wearying continually to have to ensure that we balanced representatives from the organisations representing groups of institutions within Universities UK. At times we wondered whether this rivalry might be an indication of lack of cohesion within the sector.

48 The 157 Group represents twenty six of the largest further education colleges in England.

49 Established in 1994, the 1994 Group brings together 18 research-intensive universities in the UK.

50 Million+, originally known as the Coalition of Modern Universities, is a university think-tank with 28 subscribing universities in the UK, which were established as universities after 1992.

51 The Russell Group is an association of 20 major research-intensive universities in the UK. Formed in 1994 at a meeting convened in Russell Square, the Group is composed of the Vice-Chancellors and Principals.

52 The University Alliance is a group of 24 universities including pre- and post-1992 institutions who are not members of the 1994 or Russell Groups or Million+.

53 Sector Skills Council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies

This Report

30. The structure of this Report follows the path taken through higher education from the point of view of an undergraduate student. It starts with entry and admission to higher education, examines the quality of teaching and the student's experience at university and concludes with graduation—examining degree standards.

31. As well as the issues we have highlighted in this chapter,[54] we have also taken the opportunity to flag up issues for possible consideration by our successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education and further education. We have listed these issues at Annex 2.

Responding to our Report

32. Our Report as is customary contains recommendations directed to government and a number of conclusions. It is usual practice for the Government to respond to our recommendations and conclusions within two months and we expect that it will do so. We are conscious that some of our conclusions may be for consideration by the higher education sector, including students and their representative organisations, and further education colleges providing higher education, rather than the Government and we invite those to whom these conclusions are directed or relevant to respond by publishing their responses on the Internet.

54 At paras 11 to 20

2 Entry and admission to higher education

Introduction

33. For many undergraduate students—and for the public perception of admission to university—the entrance process to university has almost become a national ritual revolving around the A-level results announced each August. The typical prospective student is seen as someone who, at age 17 or 18, pours over prospectuses for full-time courses and universities, makes an application, in some cases attends an interview, receives a response (or not) making a conditional offer, sits A-levels, receives the results, and, aged 18 or 19, leaves home and goes off to university for three years.

34. This is a process faced by many young people every year and is often relatively straightforward. UCAS,[55] the central clearing house for applications, processes half a million applications a year to higher education institutions. It made the point that for a "significant majority of applicants the progression from the 14–19 phase of education to higher education is smooth",[56] adding that the processing system is "highly efficient with the majority of places in [higher education institutions] confirmed within a day of the publication of GCE A-level results. For example, in 2008, 349,449 applicants (63%) had their places confirmed on 15 August 2008, out of a total of 554,499. By 8 October 2008 this percentage had risen to 81% (451,871 applicants).[57] (Though we note at paragraphs 12 to 14 that the process may not be as smooth in 2009 as in previous years.)

35. As, however, UCAS explained this is not the whole picture. First, there is a group of approximately 100,000 applicants who may be eligible to apply but fall through the system, though the reasons are not clear. This could be, for example, because they may not hold offers of places at university or they may not have met the conditions of their offer. Nor is it clear how many of this group do not have the minimum entry requirements in English and mathematics for higher education. Research carried out by UCAS into these "non-placed applicants" found that women, black and minority ethnic groups and older applicants are over-represented. The research confirmed that about one third of such students subsequently re-apply, but others may be lost for good to higher education.[58] Million+ expressed concern about this group and told us that some people found "it difficult to penetrate into universities; we are not sufficiently open and welcoming to them. [W]e have recognised that and we are trying to do a number of things; in particular, the extra energy that we are now putting into links with schools and colleges is important and overdue."[59]

36. Second, UCAS pointed out that the *Leitch* target[60]—of 40% of all adults in England gaining a university qualification by 2020[61] (see paragraph 142 and following)—which the

55 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

56 Ev 453, para 4.2

57 Ev 453, paras 4.4–4.5

58 Ev 454, para 4.6

59 Q 58

60 See para 6.

61 DIUS, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*, Cm 7181, July 2007, p 9; DIUS, *Investing in our Future: Departmental Report 2008*, Cm 7392, May 2008, p 68

Government is working to implement, will depend on improving the take-up of part-time, as well as full-time, learners. UCAS said that part-time learning was an important route to higher education qualifications, particularly for those seeking to combine work with learning. But at present, it noted that there was no shared system for admissions or single source of reliable information for part-time undergraduate courses. UCAS told us that research it had conducted suggested that potential learners and their advisers found it difficult to locate the information they needed.[62]

Balance of Funding

37. Universities UK pointed out to us that as the number of students in higher education grew from 1.8 million in 1997 to 2.4 million in 2007, during the same period the number of part-time students grew from 618,000 to 911,000, and the number of students aged over 21 grew from 1.2 million to 1.6 million.[63] Professor Ebdon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire and Chair of Million+, told us that 47% of his students were "over the age of 24 before they join us, yet people always assume that students are 18-year-olds".[64] Over three-fifths (60%) of initial entrants to higher education are 17-20 year olds.[65] But, apparently drawing on the work of the Campaign for Learning, the 157 Group pointed out that this group was set to receive three-quarters (75%) of the overall funding in 2010–11.[66] The Campaign for Learning considered that young full-time higher education was effectively crowding out the other three segments of higher education,[67] which it illustrated with the box below.

62 Ev 454, paras 4.10–4.13; see also Ev 311 (Million+) paras 3, 7 and Ev 236 (The Inquiry Into The Future For Lifelong Learning), para 2.

63 Ev 438, para 13

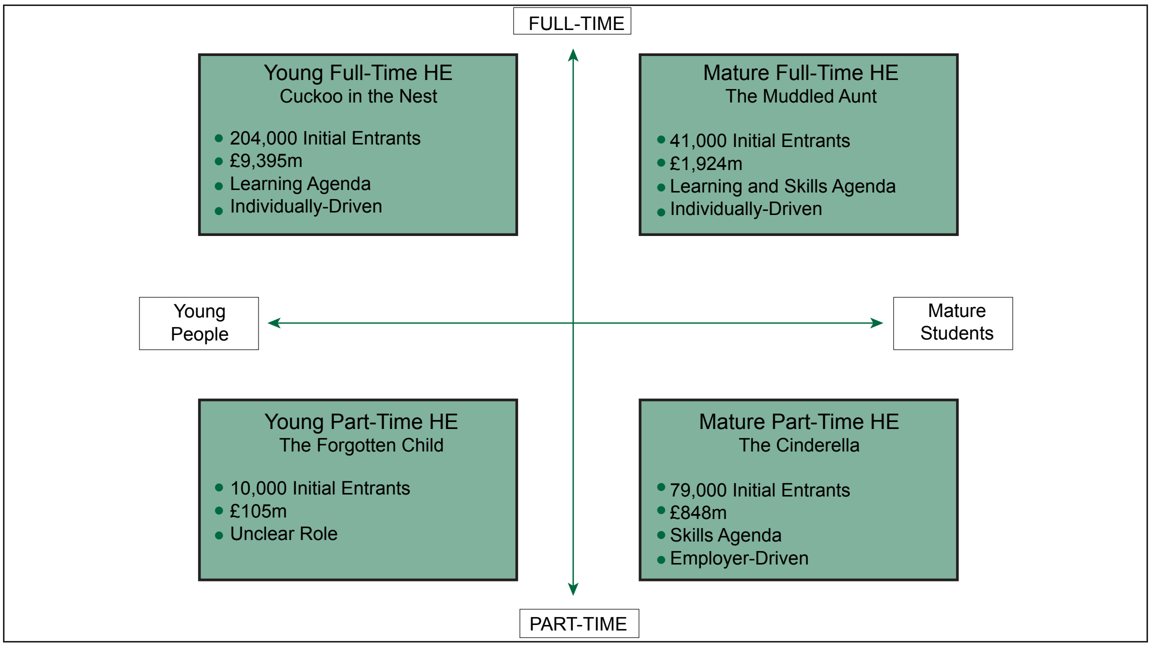
64 Q 3 (Professor Ebdon)

65 Campaign for Learning, *Higher Education and the Cuckoo In The Nest: Getting beyond the fixation with full-time study by young people*, December 2008, para 8

66 Q 80

67 Campaign for Learning, *Higher Education and the Cuckoo In The Nest: Getting beyond the fixation with full-time study by young people*, December 2008, para 8

Box 1: Initial Entrants (2006-07) and public funding of undergraduate higher education (2010-11) in England



The 157 Group's point—that full-time 17-20 year olds appear to receive more than their fair share of the funding—raises important questions about the allocation of higher education funding and whether higher education and further education should be supported by a single funding stream rather than the current arrangements. **The apparent disparity of funding in favour of young full-time students raises questions about the justification of the balance of the allocation of resources in higher education funding between young full-time, young part-time, mature full-time and mature part-time students. The allocation of resources between these groups and the broader question of a single funding stream for higher education and further education are matters that our successor committee with responsibility for both further and higher education may wish to examine.**

Role of Further Education Colleges

38. Finally, to complete the picture, the 157 Group, whose members provide higher education, pointed out that adult learners wishing to access higher education are likely to come through a further education college route. It said that for the majority of adults who wished to go on to higher education they will choose to "study locally and generally part time, owing, in part, to their own pressures and personal or family commitments"[68] and that evidence suggested that adult learners were increasingly likely to complete a Foundation Degree[69] locally and seek to "top up" with a local higher education provider.[70]

68 Ev 323, para 8; see also "Patterns in higher education: living at home", HEFCE 2009/20.

69 Foundation Degrees are higher education qualifications that combine academic study with workplace learning. They have been designed jointly by universities, colleges and employers, and are available in a range of work-related subjects (from Directgov website, www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039022).

The minutes from Foundation Degree Forward's Board Meeting of 19 February 2009 state that "HEFCE has released data indicating that over 87,000 students are enrolled on Foundation degree courses in 2008–09. This is a substantial

39. As well as providing qualified entrants to universities and colleges of higher education 286[71] further education colleges provide higher education courses and higher level qualifications (at levels 4 and 5), either in their own right or under partnership arrangements with higher education institutions. Professor Gareth Parry from the University of Sheffield in a submission to the 2005 Foster Review of Further Education[72] pointed out that further education colleges in England contributed "more than a third of entrants to higher education and teach one in eight of the undergraduate population. They are at the centre of policies to increase and widen participation in higher education".[73]

Fair Access

40. When the legislation introducing variable tuition fees for higher education institutions in England was under consideration in 2004, there were concerns that the amount of debt new graduates would be faced with could dissuade some potential students from entering higher education altogether (see paragraph 109 for more detail). In seeking to address these concerns, the Government established the Office for Fair Access to higher education (OFFA). Its core aims are:

a) to support and encourage improvements in participation rates in higher education from low income and other under-represented groups;

b) to reduce as far as practicable the barriers to higher education for students from low income and other under-represented groups by ensuring that institutions continue to invest in bursaries and outreach; and

c) to support and encourage equality of opportunity through the provision of clear and accessible financial information for students, their parents/carers and their advisers.[74]

In our view this definition appears to encompass both widening participation and fair access. For the purposes of this Report we have drawn a distinction as follows.

- We take *widening participation* to be concerned with the student body, and the sector, more generally increasing the number of students from lower socio-economic (and other under-represented) groups who can benefit from higher education. (We deal with widening participation from paragraph 57 below.)

- The term *fair access* has come to be associated with concern to ensure that students from poor backgrounds are enabled to enter the most prestigious universities with the most demanding entry requirements without unwarranted hurdles. But it goes wider and we take the term to mean an admissions process that ensures that there are no

growth on last year's figures and means the 100,000 target is within reach (and possibly achievable a year early)." www.fdf.ac.uk/about_fdf/management_board/

70 Ev 323, para 8

71 "Supporting higher education in further education colleges: Policy, practice and prospects", HEFCE 2009/5, p 8; and see also para 1.

72 "Realising the Potential: A review of the future role of further education colleges", Sir Andrew Foster, November 2005, www.dcsf.gov.uk/furthereducation/uploads/documents/foster-02-standard-font.doc

73 "Foster Review of FE 'think piece' The higher education role of further education colleges", Gareth Parry, University of Sheffield", www.dcsf.gov.uk/furthereducation/uploads/documents/Higher_EducationinFE_Gareth_Parry.doc

74 OFFA, *Annual Report and Accounts 2007–08*, HC (2007–08) 513, p 10

> unwarranted obstacles in the way of applicants to prevent them from entering the institution best suited to their aptitudes and capabilities.

We agree with the view of the University of Leicester in its written submission to the inquiry that there "needs to be clear thinking and delineation between strategies to encourage wider participation […] and strategies to encourage fair access".[75] We are therefore making a distinction and dealing with fair access in this section and with widening participation separately in the following section in this chapter.

Views of students

41. One of the questions we posed in the e-consultation with students was whether the admissions process for universities was fair. There was no consensus in the views expressed. A few considered the system fair, a larger group considered it fair but had reservations and a significant number considered it unfair. The view of one respondent who considered the admissions process fair was that it was working well:

> My experience of the admissions process was fantastic, I got offers from all the universities to which I applied, whilst still coming from a lower middle class background and going to a relatively average state school. When I went to interview at the two universities that required me to have one, my grades were never on the agenda even though they were not all A's, it was always "have you got any questions for us?' 'I see from your personal statement that...." and "why do you want to come to this university?" The interviewers wanted to know about me, not my grades.[76]

42. The concerns of those who considered the process fair with reservations and unfair coalesced around the same issues: A-levels and interviews. Much of the debate focussed on whether too much emphasis was placed on A-level results and how to differentiate those who obtained three As at A-level. Some considered that A-levels should be supplemented with, or replaced by, interviews as examination results reflected only a small part of an applicant's intelligence and aptitude. The countervailing view was that interviews made the process too subjective. Some considered that universities should not base their choice of students on their academic and socio-economic backgrounds but on the grades that they had worked hard to achieve at A-level. The view was also expressed that the focus on A-level results excluded adequate consideration of vocational training and other non-academic achievements and that it favoured those from good educational backgrounds.[77]

A-levels and selection

43. The last ten years have seen a significant increase in the proportion of A grades awarded in A-levels. In 1997, only 15.7%[78] of A-level examination results were A grades, but in 2008 the top mark comprised 25.9%[79] of the results awarded in England, Wales and

75 Ev 287, para 1

76 Ev 167

77 Ev 167–68

78 "Another A-level record, another round of qualms", *The Independent*, 16 August 2007

79 A-level results published by the Joint Council for Qualifications on 14 August 2008 at www.jcq.org.uk/homepage.cfm

Northern Ireland, and the A Grade was the modal grade—that is, there were more A grades than any other. It is outside the scope of this Report to consider the reasons for this increase, but there can be little doubt that it reduces the ability of universities facing competition for places to differentiate between applicants and to judge an applicant's potential to benefit from higher education. It follows that where competition for places is fiercest—on some courses we were told that there were 20 applicants for each place[80]—universities tend to add additional entrance requirements such as interviews and examinations.

44. For example, when we visited the University of Oxford, where competition for admission to the majority of courses was strong, the staff of the university explained the admissions and selection process in detail. The University explained that the colleges and University operated the Common Framework Agreement for Admissions and under these arrangements the University and its colleges identified students, irrespective of background, who, in the University's view, would benefit from the collegiate education provided at the University. The University told us that it spent a great deal of time and energy reviewing and interviewing candidates and that even if a candidate was not invited to interview his or her application would be reviewed by at least three members of staff. In his oral evidence to us, the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Hood, explained that during the past three or four years Oxford had tried to ensure that its admission processes were "as fair as possibly they can be in terms of assessing the quality of those applicants and most particularly their potential to succeed at Oxford" and that "we have been transparent about that and we have been rigorous about it, and if those systems are fair and transparent then the outcome will […] be what the outcome is".[81] We welcome Dr Hood's emphasis on transparency.

45. During the inquiry, we noted evidence that A-levels may not provide the full measurement of a person's potential. For example, in 2005 HEFCE examined whether the school characteristics of an 18 year-old entrant with A-level qualifications to degree courses in 1997–98 could be used to determine his or her potential in higher education. The report found that:

> students from lower performing schools are not expected to do consistently better in HE than similar students from higher performing schools. However, we did find that students from non-independent schools and colleges appeared to do consistently better than students from independent schools, when compared on a like-for-like basis."[82]

46. The 2004 Admission to Higher Education Review[83] ("the Schwartz Review") concluded that its first recommended principle of admissions was that a fair admissions system should be transparent.[84] The Review also stated that it is "fair and appropriate to consider

80 Q 27 (Professor Grant)

81 HC 370–ii, Q 189

82 HEFCE, *Schooling effects on higher education achievement: further analysis—entry at 19*, February 2005/09, para 6

83 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004

84 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, para 5.1, Principle 1

contextual factors" given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances.[85] The organisation Supporting Professionalism in Admissions said that "a number of the principles in the Schwartz Review had been successfully adopted by the higher education sector, particularly in relation to the areas of transparency, staff training and continuing professional development, aspects of professionalism and the use of technology to share resources and information".[86]

The use and application of contextual factors

47. On contextual factors, we were interested to hear Professor Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, explain that those applying for the first time to university who had a personal, social or educational disadvantage—for example, if they came from a care background—were offered by Leeds a specific programme for entry, including a discount on A-level requirements.[87] We are aware that a number of universities follow similar policies[88] and see no reason why all universities could not develop similar approaches to encourage widening participation. **We commend the University of Leeds for its programme of entry for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and conclude that this should be standard practice across the sector. In our view this practice will require higher education institutions to develop programmes for entry, which take account of contextual factors giving a discount on A-level requirements, to ensure fair access.**

48. On the use of contextual factors, we consider that the Government needs to clarify its view of their use and applicability and the evidence that underpins its view. **We recommend that the Government require higher education institutions, in receipt of public funds, to take contextual factors into account and to set out which ones it requires higher education institutions to take into account.** In our view the Government also needs to establish whether, and to what extent, higher education institutions have adopted the findings of the Schwartz Review. **We recommend that, within the next year, the Government review and report on the extent to which higher education institutions have adopted the findings of the Schwartz Review on Admission to Higher Education. The review also needs to examine the extent to which contextual factors are applied consistently across the sector. We also recommend that the Government put in place arrangements to monitor the consequences of the use of contextual factors on measures such as completion rates.**

Code of practice on admissions

49. Universities UK was concerned not to establish a uniform or mechanistic system that "would risk trading one form of inflexibility for another" and continued that it was aiming for a system "at the level of the applicant, […] to assess their potential, not to create a simple sorting out of people according to their educational background".[89] This view has to

85 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, para C4; see also paras 4.4, 4.5, 6.6, B9, B11 and B17.

86 Ev 255, para 1.6

87 Q 390; see also Qq 391 and 401.

88 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, para B9

89 Q 33

be set within an overriding principle of fair access to all higher education institutions and in this matter we are not focussing on those institutions where competition is strongest. **In our view the principle of fair access to higher education is the paramount principle that must govern admissions and we have no reservation in stating that it overrides other standard assumptions of the sector such as institutional autonomy. In our view it is unacceptable for any part of the higher education sector to cite higher education institutional autonomy as a reason to sidestep the requirement to ensure fair access.**

50. We consider that, to ensure consistency and good practice on admissions across the sector, all higher education institutions should follow established practice. As Supporting Professionalism in Admissions pointed out:

> One recommendation from the Schwartz Report was the need for a central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues for higher education provider institution […] The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme was established in May 2006 to lead on the development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and guidelines for good practice and in helping universities and colleges maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation across the HE sector. SPA is a small independent programme, funded by all UK HE funding councils until 2011 and works throughout the UK to support institutions to review their policies and procedures to make them more transparent; to use fair methods that are open and accountable […]. Over the next three years SPA will focus more on working with senior management teams within institutions on topics concerning modernising admissions and the associated good practice.[90]

We also note that in 2006 the QAA produced a code of practice for admissions to higher education in higher education institutions.[91]

51. In our view, it is important that the operation and principles underpinning admissions arrangements are fully explained by all higher education institutions and that applicants know how, and against what criteria, they will be assessed. We consider that higher education institutions have nothing to lose—and potentially much to gain—by explaining not only the mechanics of their selection processes but also the principles underlying their processes and how they measure the potential of prospective students to benefit from study at their institutions. For example, in our view, it would be good practice that all applications for places should be reviewed by at least two people and that contextual factors are clearly established that can legitimately be taken into account when assessing applications. **We consider that there is a role for government working with the higher education sector to agree a set of principles that apply to the admission process, which should be promulgated as a code of practice on admissions to higher education across institutions. We stress that we are not calling for a common admissions process or for government to specify the actual admissions and selection rules, but, given the diversity of higher education institutions, we conclude that the sector should have arrangements**

90 Ev 254, para 1.2

91 QAA, "*Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 10: Admissions to higher education*", September 2006

that reduce the elements of randomness and chance in the system and help ensure students to get a fairer deal.

Mutual recognition agreements

52. Professor Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds, told us about mutual recognition of pre-admission arrangements at Leeds:

> we are partnering with ten other institutions […] many of which are in the Russell Group that have a similar programme and we are arranging to swap students, as it were. So if a student does well in our ten credit module and we make an offer and that student does not wish to come to Leeds and wishes to go to another university they can transfer that credit across.[92]

Professor Arthur explained that the arrangements at his university had the advantage that they involved direct interaction with the applicant student and "we have the security of having taken them through one of our own modules and we have seen the results; so we have evaluated their potential in a way that we are confident about the course".[93] He added that whether other universities would be "confident about our activities is up to them".[94] **We consider that where universities agree to recognise each other's students—either applicants who have met their admission criteria, including those who have earned a discount on the usual entrance requirements, or students who have earned credits—such an approach could make a significant contribution to credit transfer and portability for students wishing or needing to transfer between higher education institutions and in expanding both participation and diversity in the student body. We recommend that the Government require those higher education institutions in receipt of public funds to enter mutual recognition agreements and for the terms of all agreements to be published.**

Fair access to universities in the Russell Group and 1994 Group

53. Professor Driscoll, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University, was of the view that concentration on admission of "working class" children to Russell Group universities was "very much a second or third order of importance to the unfairness of people who do not get a place in any university".[95] He pointed out that universities were "faced with record applications and over the next three years, if there is no lifting in the numbers cap[96] [on the number of admissions], […] students who could get a place in university will not get a place".[97]

54. Professor Arthur from Leeds, a Russell Group university, appeared to take a different view. He pointed out to us that nine of the members of our Committee were graduates of

92 Q 401

93 Q 404

94 *As above*

95 Qq 405, 407

96 See para 12.

97 Q 405

Russell Group institutions,[98] with the implication, so we perceived it, that graduates from the Group had better access to certain professions. The Schwartz Report noted higher education was “a valuable commodity: it can affect salary, job security and power to influence society.”[99] In its submission in March 2009 to the Milburn Commission on access to the professions, the Sutton Trust said that from its comparison of the university backgrounds (in terms of the first degrees) of leading professionals what was “most striking is that almost all those in our surveys had participated in higher education and most had attended a handful of the most selective, research-led institutions.”[100] The Trust set out the results in a table:

Table 2: University backgrounds broken down by profession

Profession	Year	Sample	Oxbridge %	ST13 %[101]
Barristers	2004	337	82	
Judges	2007	100	78	
"Magic Circle" Solicitors	2004	429	53	
Journalists	2006	97	45	13[102]
Lords	2007	631	42	56
Chief Executive Officers	2007	100	39	
MPs	2007	625	27	44
Vice-Chancellors	2008	114	23	47
Medics	2007	100	15	
ALL		2,533	45	

The Sutton Trust also made the point that it was possible to compare the university backgrounds of the leading figures of today with their counterparts of ten or twenty years ago.[103]

98 Q 434

99 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, para 2.1

100 “The Educational Backgrounds of Leading Lawyers, Journalists, Vice Chancellors, Politicians, Medics and Chief Executives”, The Sutton Trust submission to the Milburn Commission on access to the professions, March 2009, p 8

101 The Sutton Trust defines this group as the 13 universities that came top of an average ranking of newspaper league tables in 2000. They are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College London, LSE, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, UCL, Warwick and York.

102 This figure appears incorrect as ST13 includes Oxford and Cambridge, the total for which is 45.

103 “The Educational Backgrounds of Leading Lawyers, Journalists, Vice Chancellors, Politicians, Medics and Chief Executives”, The Sutton Trust submission to the Milburn Commission on access to the professions, March 2009, p 9

Table 3: Comparing university backgrounds of those at the top of professions

	Year	Sample	OXB%	ST13%[104]
Judges	1989	100	87	
	2007	100	78	
Journalists	1986	100	67	
	2006	100	56	
Vice-Chancellors	1998	101	36	50
	2008	114	27	47
Medics	1987	100	28	
	2007	100	15	
Chief Executive Officers	1987	100	67	
	2007	100	39	
Politicians	1974	100	62	
	2007	100	42	
Barristers	1989	136	88	97
	2004	337	82	93
"Magic circle" solicitors	1988	138	65	83
	2004	429	53	79

55. The evidence from the Sutton Trust indicates that entrance to, and graduation from, certain universities has generated higher lifetime earnings and arguably greater social capital. We are not, in this Report, taking a view that this is a good or bad thing. If, however, it is the case, as the evidence appears to show, then it follows that fair access to these higher education institutions is a matter of legitimate public interest.

56. The universities in the 1994 and Russell Groups have for a variety of reasons had the greatest competition for places and they have the resources to fund intensive and demanding teaching and they also offer degrees that have been perceived as carrying a premium in the employment market. It is therefore essential that access to institutions in these Groups is fair. We consider that it is of particular importance that admission to the universities where competition is greatest must be completely fair. In our view, both fair access and widening participation are important and one cannot be traded off against the

104 The Sutton Trust defines this group as the 13 universities that came top of an average ranking of newspaper league tables in 2000. They are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College London, LSE, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, UCL, Warwick and York.

other. **We consider that fair access must be seen as important by the whole higher education sector, particularly those higher education institutions that historically have generated the highest lifetime earnings and most social capital for their graduates.**

Widening Participation

57. Whereas fair access is concerned with the specific institutions that students enter, and ensuring that there are no unwarranted barriers, widening participation is concerned with the student body, and the sector more generally, and ensuring, as Professor Driscoll pointed out, that those who could go to university apply and get a place.[105] The Russell Group defined widening participation as "increasing the number of students from lower socio-economic groups who can benefit from higher education".[106] We would prefer "increasing the *proportion* of students from lower socio-economic groups and from other groups who are underrepresented in higher education who can benefit from higher education". Schemes such as that outlined in oral evidence by Professor Arthur (at paragraph 47) show that fair access and widening participation can be linked. But widening participation raises broader and complex issues.

58. The NAO (National Audit Office) provided us with a memorandum[107] setting out the findings from its reports on widening participation[108] and student retention[109] in higher education. The NAO said that:

> Access to higher education and success within it will provide most students with greater opportunities for the rest of their lives. Over their working life graduates have been shown to earn, on average, over £100,000 more than similar non-graduates with A levels.[110] Employers, the economy, and society as a whole benefit when students complete their studies.[111]

The NAO identified socio-economic background as "a strong determinant of higher education participation,"[112] adding that, while participation of young, full-time students from lower socio-economic backgrounds had improved slightly over the previous five years,[113] people from "lower socio-economic backgrounds made up around one half of the population of England, but represented 29% of young, full-time, first-time entrants to higher education".[114]

105 Qq 405–06

106 Ev 405

107 Ev 503

108 National Audit Office, *Widening participation in higher education, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General*, Session 2007–2008, HC 725

109 National Audit Office, *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General*, Session 2006–2007, HC 616

110 DIUS, unpublished analysis; PricewaterhouseCoopers/Universities UK, Research Report, *The economic benefits of a degree*, 2007; cited by the NAO at Ev 512, para 3.

111 Ev 503, para 3

112 Ev 505, para 8

113 The NAO report was published in June 2008, but its field work is likely to have been carried out before that date.

114 Ev 505, para 8

59. The NAO confirmed that "the attainment of qualifications by students at secondary school or college played a critical role in gaining access to higher education"[115] and that:

> Low achievement was the principal reason for the difference between rates of participation in higher education for different groups. Notably, all applicants with the necessary qualifications were equally likely to accept a higher education place as others with the same level of attainment, regardless of their family background.

60. The Russell Group told us that "you cannot solve decades of socio-economic inequality in this country by simply widening the gates of admissions to universities".[116] In its written evidence the Group drew attention to a number of factors affecting, and in some instances narrowing, participation in higher education:

- Compelling evidence demonstrates how early the problem of educational inequality begins.[117] At 22 months, the link between socio-economic background and educational attainment is evident. By the age of six, middle-class children who had low scores in cognitive tests at 22 months have completely overtaken the few poorer children who had done well in those tests.
- The socio-economic gap actually widens as children progress through school and by GCSE, the gap becomes a gulf. Attainment of 5+ good (A*-C) GCSEs varies by over 40 percentage points between the top and bottom socio-economic backgrounds (77 per cent compared to 31 per cent in 2002), so that children with professional parents are well over twice as likely to gain five or more good GCSEs than children with parents in routine occupations. Young people whose parents have degree qualifications are also disproportionately more likely to study post-16 at A-level—61 per cent of pupils with at least one parent with a degree level qualification as opposed to 27 per cent where neither parent has A-level qualifications.[118]
- Pupils who go to independent and grammar schools are far more likely to take key subjects such as sciences, maths and modern languages. Pupils at independent schools are roughly three times more likely to be doing further maths and 2.5 times more likely to be doing a language A-level than those at comprehensive schools.
- The number of students receiving 3+ A grades at A-level is increasing and the students achieving the top grades are studying disproportionately at independent schools.
- This divergence in levels of attainment is accelerating instead of diminishing. The independent sector saw a 9.1 percentage point increase in the number of A grades at A-level between 2002 and 2008—from 41.3 per cent to 50.4 per cent. Over the same period, top grades in comprehensives increased by only 3.9 points to 20.4 per cent.[119, 120]

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115 Ev 505, para 10

116 Q 39

117 L Feinstein, *Pre-school Educational Inequality? British children in the 1970 cohort*, London Center for Economic Performance, 1999; cited by the Russell Group at Ev 401.

118 Department for Education and Skills, *Youth Cohort Study: The Activities and Experiences of 16 Year Olds in England and Wales*, 2002 at wttp://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000382/V5sfr04-2003.pdf; cited by the Russell Group at Ev 404.

119 Joint Council for Qualifications (2008): 14 August 2008 press conference; cited by the Russell Group at Ev 405.

120 Ev 404–05

61. Further salient data was supplied to us by Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which showed that of those reaching 19 by the end of the 2007–08 academic year (i.e. having completed GCSEs in year 11 in 2004): 41% of pupils with 7 GCSEs, grades A*-C, had not achieved a Level 3 qualification by 19; 30% of those with 8 GCSEs had not done so; 16% of those with 9 GCSEs had not; and as many as 10% of pupils—14,000—with 10 or more GCSEs grades A*-C had not progressed to Level 3 by 19.[121] Many of these young people appear to have had the qualifications to be able to continue their education to a higher level, though with the reduction in the expansion of numbers entering higher education—see paragraph 12 and following—many would not have been able to enter higher education. Pat Bacon from the 157 Group said that "we have to find a way of teasing out the brightest and best of our communities" because "there are an awful lot of young people who are not at Level 3 by the time they are 18; therefore, the opportunity for part-time study, for picking up higher education further on, is important".[122] The 157 Group called for a review of Level 3 provision,[123] which covers A-levels, diplomas and apprenticeships. **It appears that not only are levels of attainment between state and independent schools diverging at Level 3 but also large numbers of able young people are not studying to Level 3, the main entrance gate to benefit from higher education.**

121 Table showing progression to Level 3 at 19 by year 11 attainment (19 in 2008 cohort, numbers rounded to nearest thousand, rates to nearest whole number)

Year 11 GCSEs at Grades A*-C (including GNVQ equivalents)	Total	L3 at 19	L3 at 19 rate
0	155,000	7,000	4%
1	45,000	6,000	13%
2	31,000	6,000	21%
3	27,000	8,000	29%
4	32,000	10,000	32%
5	31,000	13,000	42%
6	31,000	15,000	50%
7	34,000	20,000	59%
8	44,000	31,000	70%
9	75,000	63,000	84%
10+	143,000	129,000	90%
Total	**647,000**	**308,000**	**48%**

Source: DCSF, Matched administrative data, 19 in 2008 cohort; supplied in unpublished e-mail

122 Q 89

123 *As above*

62. We recognise the point that the Russell Group is making that much of the disparity in attainment at Level 3 is attributable to factors that occur well before application to university and that the steps that universities can take will not remove these factors. We understand that the Government may plan to review A-levels and other Level 3 qualifications in 2013.[124] In the light of the evidence we received in this inquiry we consider that such a timescale is too long: there appears to be a growing divergence between the state and independent sectors in this respect. Many able young people are failing to progress from GCSEs to Level 3 and, as we note later in this chapter, many young people are receiving inadequate careers guidance, including poor advice on suitable A-levels necessary for entry into higher education. **We recommend that the Government carry out, before the next Spending Review, a full review of the provision of education at Level 3, including the Qualifications Framework and all routes into higher education, to ensure that those who have the ability to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.**

63. We have noted that members of the 157 Group provide higher education. In our view the review should also include an examination of the extent to which expansion of higher education in further education colleges would assist those who currently do not progress to higher education. **We recommend that the review include an examination of expanding higher education provided in further education colleges, to assist those who currently could, but do not, go forward into higher education.**

Benchmarks

64. While the main levers for widening participation in higher education lie outside universities, primarily in the home and at school, this does not mean that higher education institutions have a minimal part to play in widening participation. Moreover, the factors that the Russell Group set out (see paragraph 60) have the potential to narrow participation in higher education. In our view this is an area that government needs to monitor carefully. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes annual performance indicators on the composition of students in individual institutions for three under-represented groups: individuals from state schools, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from areas with low participation in higher education.[125] The benchmarks are not targets and have no financial incentives or penalties associated with them. As the HEFCE guidance on the benchmarks explained:

> Because there are such differences between institutions, the average values for the whole of the higher education sector are not necessarily helpful when comparing higher education institutions. Adjusted sector averages are therefore calculated for each institution that take into account some of the factors which contribute to differences between them. The factors are: subject of study, qualifications on entry, age on entry (young or mature). The average that has been adjusted for these factors is called the adjusted sector benchmark. The benchmark can be used by higher education institutions and others in two ways

124 DCSF, *Promoting achievement, valuing success: A strategy for 14–19 qualifications*, March 2008, para 21

125 NAO, *Widening participation in higher education*, HC (2007–08) 725, paras 1 and 7; see also Ev 505 (NAO), para 11 ff.

- to see how well an institution is performing compared with the [higher education] sector as a whole
- to decide whether it is meaningful to compare two institutions.[126]

65. The Government's 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, included a commitment to widen participation in higher education, by helping more people from under-represented groups, particularly lower socio-economic backgrounds, to participate successfully in higher education.[127] Professor Driscoll from Middlesex University said that if "we did not have the benchmark then we cannot make progress".[128] He considered that the essence of any system that was trying to make progress was to "set as clear a target as possible and then to ask people to produce the strategies that will achieve that. The strategies we use at the moment may be failing and we may need to rethink how we can get closer to those as targets."[129]

66. We raised the issue of benchmarks for the state school participation rate (set out in the table below) with the Vice-Chancellors of Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford.

Table 4: Oxford universities' benchmarks

2007–08[130]	Indicator %	Benchmark %
Oxford Brookes University	73.1	89.5
University of Oxford	53.4	77.5

67. Professor Beer said that Oxford Brookes was "12%[131] adrift from the benchmark",[132] and she said that there was not a simple answer to missing the benchmark because "we work hard in state schools to bring in more students; we do no recruitment activity at all in private schools, nothing at all. All our money is spent on recruitment from the state school sector".[133] Dr Hood said that clearly the University of Oxford did not meet the benchmark but he considered that the benchmark was not relevant to the University given the disciplinary mix and the numbers that applied for each discipline. He pointed out:

> we would have of the order of 1,300 applicants for undergraduate medicine for 150 places. We have fewer than 300 applicants for 150 places in classics, for example. The spectrum of schools in this country does not prepare students for classics degrees—that is just one illustration—and you need to do this discipline by discipline by

126 "Better higher education performance indicators", HEFCE News Release, 19 July 2007

127 Department for Education and Skills, *The future of higher education*, Cm 5735, pp 5 and 92

128 Q 400

129 *As above*

130 "Table T1b Young full-time undergraduate entrants 2007/08", HESA, www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1434&Itemid=141

131 The latest figures in the table reproduced above show a 16% disparity, rather than the 12% cited by Professor Beer.

132 HC 370–ii, Q 179

133 HC 370–ii, Q 181

> discipline. Another of the flaws in the comparisons that are made is to assume that the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge should be the same, but again there are disciplinary differences, for example veterinary science and architecture at Cambridge which we do not have here at Oxford, and different profiles of applicants from the different sub-sectors of the national system. […] I do not think the benchmark is appropriate.[134]

68. We found benchmarks a useful tool when carrying out our inquiry and we consider that they provide a helpful focus on widening participation for higher education institutions and also in measuring progress. They do, however, have their limitations: the case of classics at the University of Oxford showed that the application of the benchmark to that subject served no purpose as the pool of potential students come predominantly from the independent sector. As they are currently conceived and calculated, the institution-based benchmarks are in effect averages, and by definition there must be broadly as many below as above. Therefore, although they are useful as a way of seeing where an institution stands in relation to the sector as a whole (and to comparable institutions or to see changes over time), to have an outcome beneath its benchmark is not in itself indicative of unsatisfactory performance. It is a necessary feature of these benchmarks that half of all institutions will fall below their benchmarks. Subject to these caveats, benchmarks can be of use in examining the higher education sector. **We conclude that the performance indicators which the Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes on the composition of students from under-represented groups in individual higher education institutions provide a useful focus for the higher education sector on widening participation and should continue to be published annually. We consider, however, that benchmarks should not be used as targets and that failure to meet benchmarks should not be used to criticise higher education institutions until they are better developed to discount all confounding factors.**

Schools and further education colleges

69. There is a wider responsibility on government to ensure that those parts of the education system outside higher education, over which it has greater control, give individuals who could fulfil their potential at university the opportunity to participate in higher education. The NAO explained to us that HEFCE did not directly fund widening participation activities in institutions but that instead since 1999–2000, it had:

> allocated a proportion of its teaching grant based on the types of students recruited, recognising that students from under-represented groups or with lower entry qualifications were likely to cost more to teach and retain, and counteracting a disincentive to recruit them. It allocated recurrent funding for widening participation to institutions in proportion to the number of existing students from under-represented groups and gave £392 million in recurrent funding to institutions between 2001–02 and 2007–08.[135]

134 HC 370–ii, Q 182

135 Ev 506, para 21

70. We also received a significant volume of evidence and information about outreach undertaken by the higher education sector.

- On our visits to the University of Oxford and Imperial College London we found impressive evidence of the outreach to local schools—the Lincolnshire Access Initiative[136] and the Pimlico Connection[137] respectively.
- Professor Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds, also told us about the Access to Leeds Programme.[138]
- Professor Driscoll, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex, gave information about the outreach with schools in London.[139]
- In written evidence the Flying Start Project, which is being conducted by Liverpool Hope University and the University of Derby, provided information about the Liverpool Hope University STARS project and operation of the University of Derby as the first UK integrated dual-sector institution.[140]
- Professor Baker, Chair of GuildHE, which represents 29 higher education institutions, explained that:

> we have had very strong links with professions; and we are very much based in our communities. At Marjon,[141] we do not recruit nationally; we recruit locally, sub-regionally or regionally. That does place a very strong emphasis on building up community relations. Therefore, in my own institution for example, we do not wait until students are 17 or 18 to think about encouraging them to look at the campus; we work with people at primary school level, because the vast majority of our students are first-to-go-to-university students. One of the things you therefore have to do is to break down what might be seen as intimidatory barriers to encouraging

136 The Lincolnshire Access Initiative at the University of Oxford has been running since 2000, and aims to encourage applications to Oxford from students in Lincolnshire, North and NE Lincolnshire. The initiative operates on behalf of the university as a whole, and it also works jointly with Cambridge University to encourage applications from all types of schools and colleges in the region, but particularly those from the maintained sector. The initiative also aims to raise the higher education aspirations of both sixth formers and younger students.

137 The Pimlico Connection is a student volunteering activity that has been running at Imperial College since 1975. It offers state schools in London (both primary and secondary) that are close to the main college campus, the chance to have Imperial College undergraduates assisting in science, maths, ICT or D&T classes on a Wednesday afternoon between November and March every year. As well as providing assistance they act as role models. See also Ev 157 (Informal meeting with staff at Imperial College London).

138 Qq 388–91

139 Q 392

140 Ev 304, paras 8–9. The submission explained that:

The Liverpool Hope University STARS project is a Compact Scheme where 120 year-12 students from 22 local schools work with Hope undergraduate student mentors in a programme of monthly contact, special events and a four-day project focused on writing for assessment at A level. The programme focuses on the synoptic A level paper and reflective writing, as well as transferable competencies related to university assessment criteria.

At the University of Derby, the first UK integrated dual-sector institution, there is a further education college offering A levels on over 16 subjects, and a Compact Scheme with over 50 partner schools, whose students made over 11,000 individual applications to study at HE at the University in 2006–07. Over 90% achieve the grades they need and over 70% go on to enrol. The Compact Scheme employs undergraduate students as mentors and Compact Assistants in schools and colleges (www.derby.ac.uk/fpl/partnerships), as well as operating an award-winning web site providing information about choosing courses, applying to university, study skills and being an effective student.

141 University College Plymouth St Mark and St John

> them into higher education. It is working with the whole community; it is working with the whole family.[142]

71. Million+, which represents 28 universities, pointed out that 48% of those admitted to universities came from further education colleges.[143] In addition, as we have noted, others enter higher education in further education colleges. The 157 Group, representing the 26 largest further education colleges, pointed out that "General [further education] colleges have a higher proportion of entrants from lower socio-economic groups to [higher education] (34%) compared to 25% in Sixth Form Colleges and 8% in private schools".[144] We also noted that arrangements were evolving. John Harris from SEMTA said that:

> Two of our large engineering companies […] say that 50% of their professional engineers have come through their apprenticeship programmes, so they have come to [further education], on to [higher education], and probably through professional institutions to become chartered engineers. That is an interesting situation. I think that goes on in smaller companies but it is not so visible, but certainly in larger companies it is very visible. [We] see the diploma as a real opportunity to give young people an opportunity to learn about, in our case, engineering, […] and to find out at a fairly young age if that is what they want to do. We are confident. [We] are confident that advanced diploma graduates will be able to go into the university and continue their studies. It is a real opportunity for us.[145]

72. Ms Bacon from the 157 Group said that further education colleges had "much to offer as strategic partners"[146] and that its members were "well informed by our local communities".[147] She explained that they knew:

> what the demands are on the ground, and indeed very much welcome and hope to see more of the flexibilities to enable us to deliver. For example, I know that my staff were in a manufacturing company yesterday, helping them with some skills during the current downturn. I do not think that we need to be precious about at what level. It could be about basic skills; it could be about foundation degree level.[148]

We noted that Professor Parry in his submission to the 2005 Foster Review of Further Education[149] pointed out that:

> Where evidence is available on the background of students, the number and proportion of undergraduate entrants from lower socio-economic groups is shown to be higher for [further education colleges] than for maintained schools. Between

142 Q 82

143 Q 38 (Professor Ebdon)

144 Ev 322, para 4

145 HC 370–iii, Q 409

146 Q 111

147 *As above*

148 *As above*

149 "Realising the Potential: A review of the future role of further education colleges", Sir Andrew Foster, November 2005, www.dcsf.gov.uk/furthereducation/uploads/documents/foster-02-standard-font.doc

> the different types of college, the greater part of this widening participation role is played by general [further education colleges].[150]

73. **We welcome the outreach to local schools and colleges that many universities undertake and the growing co-operation between higher education, schools and further education, which has the potential to widen participation in higher education. We encourage all higher education institutions to develop such partnerships.** This is a key area where the Government has a responsibility—both to foster co-operation and to ensure that the split of responsibilities for education between what was DIUS, and is now BIS, and DCSF does not create obstacles. **We recommend that the Government put arrangements in place to enhance the co-operation between schools, further education colleges and higher education to facilitate widening participation in higher education.** It is also worth noting that other routes to strengthen outreach and co-operation between schools and universities potentially include the direct involvement of higher education institutions in school programmes and new school initiatives. The current involvement by a number of UK universities in sponsorship or support of schools should be carefully monitored to see if this provides or has the potential for this. Other elements of such co-operation could include the secondment of higher education staff or students to local schools for specific initiatives or periods or coursework at their local universities from schools. It has also to be recognised that outreach initiatives can be both demanding and time-consuming for higher education institutions.[151] **We recommend therefore that the Government and HEFCE urgently examine ways in which both higher education institutions and staff are incentivised to instigate and carry out outreach initiatives. This might, for example, include ring-fenced funding of a relatively modest nature to support widening participation specifically to encourage new outreach initiatives and to recognise the specific contributions of individual lecturers and staff at higher education institutions.**

74. During our visit to the US we heard how a university—Howard University in Washington DC—had effectively supported young people from socio-economically deprived wards of the city to focus on achieving excellence in STEM subjects and to improve their choices of later progression into higher education. **We consider that the Government should encourage higher education institutions to pilot initiatives that have potential to increase higher education/school co-operation and facilitate wider participation.**

75. **We have not examined in detail in this Report the relationship between higher education and further education and this is an issue that our successor committee with responsibility for further education and higher education may wish to consider.**

Foundation degrees and foundation years

76. The 157 Group explained that many of its members provided foundation degrees and that “this was very much designed with an articulated progression route” to increase levels of higher education.[152] Further education colleges can be granted their own foundation

150 “Foster Review of FE ‘think piece’ The higher education role of further education colleges”, Gareth Parry, University of Sheffield”, www.dcsf.gov.uk/furthereducation/uploads/documents/Higher_EducationinFE_Gareth_Parry.doc

151 See also para 149.

152 Q 79

degree awarding powers[153] and the Group said, as we have noted, that adult learners were "more likely to complete a Foundation Degree locally and potentially seek to 'top up' with a local HEI provider" and that providing such routes for adults in higher education was "essential to both meeting the 50% target and widening [participation]".[154] While acknowledging that the foundation degree was a qualification in its own right, the Group noted it had had ex-students "who did the foundation degree coming out of the university of their choice, in some case with First-Class Honours".[155]

77. We also heard that a "foundation year" could prepare those who had not yet acquired the skills to study at university. Professor Roger Brown, former Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent, said that the universities had to cope with a "much wider range of students from a much more diverse set of backgrounds" and that there were more students than previously who were "not well prepared for degree level entry, and this is true even for students with good A Level results".[156] He considered that if the higher education curriculum was being designed today a foundation year might be available generally. Professor Brown added that there was an issue about the extent to which the school and university curricula were drifting apart rather than coming together. He explained:

> In the old days A levels were a good proxy for first year university entry; A Levels do not fulfil that need now and therefore on the one hand you have a proliferation of rival qualifications like the pre-U, the A star, *et cetera*; but on the other hand of course those qualifications are being taken from pupils from a more differential range of schools. I think there is a serious issue about the mismatch between the school and the university curriculum, which individual universities—and most universities—that have similar arrangements […] cannot necessarily cope with.[157]

78. These views chimed with concerns raised by the Flying Start Project that the division of post-16 education into separately organised and funded sectors had "led to increasing differences in the types of student learning, writing and assessment that are expected at A-level and in Higher Education" and that those differences were exacerbating the "difficulties that many students experience in the transition to university study".[158] The Project said that there was a "demonstrable need for greater shared understandings of learning and assessment among practitioners" across the school, further education and higher education sectors.[159] We were concerned to be told by the Flying Start Project that:

> Post-16 education alone does not sufficiently prepare students for university study. One study showed that the majority of first year university undergraduates felt that A levels had not prepared them for university.[160] A comparative study of teaching

153 Section 19 of the Further Education and Training Act 2007 enables the Privy Council to grant powers to award foundation degrees to further education institutions in England.

154 Ev 323, para 8

155 Q 79

156 Q 393; see also Q 486.

157 Q 393

158 Ev 302

159 Ev 303, para 2

160 Keverne Smith, *School to university: an investigation into the experience of first-year students of English at British Universities*, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 2004, Vol 3, No 1, pp 81–93

> methods found that A level students were not expected to study autonomously and development of critical analytic skills was mainly limited to preparation for specific exam questions, whereas [higher education] students were expected to be more autonomous and were encouraged to develop more general analytical skills for assessment.[161] The consequence is that many universities find themselves having to offer classes in essay writing because students are unable to write critically.[162, 163]

But, the Flying Start Project added, institutions were working together and a developing feature of post-compulsory education was the emergence of dual-sector institutions providing further education and higher education, and universities with close links to schools and further education colleges. It said that those institutions had "developed transition programmes focusing on generic study skills, peer mentoring, and residential experiences, which have been shown to improve university retention, progression and completion".[164]

Community colleges

79. When we visited the USA we discussed the operation of community colleges and visited the North Virginia Community College, which offers two-year associate degrees, one-year certificates and short career studies certificates. We found widespread support for community colleges. The American Council on Education indicated that they were the largest part of the higher education sector and were increasingly becoming the gateway to higher education. A common pattern was for a young person to enter a community college, study for two years and then take their credits and transfer to a State university from which he or she graduated after a further two years of study—known as "two-plus-two". The University of California (UCAL) Washington DC Office representatives, whom we met, commented that community colleges provided entry level to higher education for "second chancers", the opportunity for those in work to re-train and excellent vocational courses. The point was also made to us that some of the best students in UCAL had entered via community colleges and the two-plus-two route. (We should add that we are aware that some universities, especially the leading private institutions, while recognising credits accumulated by a student coming from a community college, may not accept these as sufficient for enrolment.)

80. In its evidence to us, the Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning pointed out that:

> In 2002–03 over 11,000 of the 300,000 students who entered higher education institutions did so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years, with most of these students receiving no credit for their previous studies[…] Progress is much slower than it should be. The problem is not a technical but a cultural one. In other words, we know how to make a coherent system work, but there is a lack of political will, at system and institutional level. The flexibility which a

161 Gillian Ballinger, *Bridging the gap between A level and degree: some observations on managing the transitional stage in the study of English Literature*, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 2003, Vol 2, No 1, pp 99–109

162 "A level students unable to write essays", *The Times*, 15 August 2007

163 Ev 303, para 1

164 Ev 303, para 3

> proper credit framework brings will be all the more needed in the light of current economic turbulence and the effects this is having on employment: large numbers of adults will be seeking to improve their qualifications without having to commit themselves to a long stretch of full-time education.[165]

Credit accumulation and transfer

81. In England credit accumulation and transfer has not developed to the same extent as in the USA[166]—though we recognise that even there it is far from universal—and so for community colleges or their equivalent to be developed in England transfer arrangements would have to become more widespread. Credit accumulation and transfer also has the potential to enable greater flexibility within the higher education sector which would allow part-time and mature students, as we discuss in chapter 3, to play a significant part in meeting the Government's Ambition 2020 (see paragraph 142 and following). Professor Driscoll, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University, considered that:

> we need to grasp the nettle of a national credit-based system and national credit-based funding. You will find that the universities, like mine, that have very diverse student bodies (lots of part-timers, full-timers, people moving in and out […]) are closer to what you will find, typically, in the United States than those universities that are very monolithic, most of their undergraduates are recruited […] They do not want it because they see it is a hassle, but I think we have to take a national decision on this, and it is about time we caught up with the rest of the world, we introduced a national credit-based system and we fund students on credit as well, or institutions for their teaching.[167]

82. We therefore asked John Denham for his view both of the transfer of credits between higher education institutions and of community colleges. He said that in the speech he had made in February 2008 (see paragraph 7) he had held out the prospect that students studying for a degree "might gain credits from more than one institution offering higher education and that the sector would be very likely to develop a much better system of interchangeable and mutual recognition of credits in the future".[168] He considered, however, that it was for the higher education sector and:

> not for me to describe that. That would open up the possibility of work done in one institution, possibly an FE /HE college, being a foundation for further study at another institution. Where I get nervous or just think it is not possible is the idea that there should be some central re-structuring of our institutions. The Americans have evolved quite a highly structured thing but it has evolved over time. We start from a different place.[169]

165 Ev 236, section 1

166 HEPI, *Credit Accumulation and Transfer, and the Bologna Process: an Overview*, October 2004, pp 22–25

167 Q 442 (Professor Driscoll)

168 Q 503

169 *As above*

But, in addressing the question whether England should have community colleges and the two-plus-two model, he added that:

> What I am saying is the ability to follow that path is undoubtedly something for which there will be greater demand in the future. I think we will see a greater development of higher level work based learning. Foundation degrees deliver that to a considerable but not total extent. It is still actually the case that if you, for example, do an apprenticeship you reach craft level—level three—and you want to go to a higher level with the same method of learning, you will not easily always find a place in a higher education institution to do that, or necessarily in an FE/HE college. So there will be additional ways of learning to a higher level and that will be part of the system.[170]

Conclusions

83. While noting the Secretary of State's caution, we see advantages in the community college model: a route into higher education for those in groups traditionally not well represented in higher education; the opportunity for those with family responsibilities to enter higher education in their locality; and the facility to move on with the possibility to transfer credits earned. Translation of the model to England could lead to an enhanced role for further education colleges to provide higher education. As we have noted, 286 further education colleges already provide some form of higher education with further education colleges in England teaching around 11% of the students studying on courses leading to higher education and higher level qualifications.[171] **In our view, if the community college credit system model operating in the US were adopted in England, it would provide much greater flexibility in higher education in this country, which will be essential to widening participation. We consider that one route to the introduction of the model is to expand the provision of higher education in further education colleges.** As we have already noted at paragraph 39, further education colleges in England contribute more than a third of entrants to higher education and teach one in eight of the undergraduate population; and they are at the centre of policies to increase and widen participation in higher education. **We conclude that the Government should accelerate the expansion of higher education provided in further education colleges.**

84. We as a Committee favour the widening of the access routes into higher education but we also recognise that opening the gates wider will assist no-one if those admitted have the cognitive ability but not the learning skills to take full advantage of the benefits of higher education. **When the Government comes to set out its vision for higher education over the next 10–15 years it is essential that it explains how students with the required cognitive abilities but without matching learning skills will be supported and assisted. The Government needs to set out how it wishes to see the current foundation degree arrangements evolve—particularly, how many entrants to higher education it expects to commence with a foundation year and what financial support they can expect. We recommend that the Government take immediate steps to introduce a credit transfer**

170 Q 506

171 Ev 299 (Learning and Skills Council), paras 5–6; HEFCE, *Supporting higher education in further education colleges Policy, practice and prospects*, HEFCE 2009/05, March 2009, p 8.

system which will allow credit transfer and portability between tertiary education institutions in England—that is, between further and higher and within higher education institutions.

85. As Professor Brown pointed out, setting up a system of credit transfer would require an examination of quality assurance.[172] We examine quality and standards in chapter 5. But we consider it is essential that for a system of credit transfer to operate satisfactorily the standard of credits earned by a student in say, a foundation year at one institution, would need to be recognised across the higher education sector, to enable that student to move on within higher education more widely. Higher education institutions accepting students with credits from another institution have to have confidence in the standards of the credits. **In our view, a prerequisite for a system of credit transfer is a national system that validates quality assurance and the standards of credits earned by students.**

Completion of courses

86. If greater credit transfer and portability across higher education institutions were to be introduced, the higher education sector would have to put in place arrangements to follow students through to the completion of their courses. We were concerned to be informed by Professor Longden of Liverpool Hope University that failure to complete courses was often not, in his view, seen within parts of the sector as an institutional problem but was seen rather as the student's problem. He advised that it was "about saying to both parties that there is an element contributed by the student […] but there is also quite a considerable element which is the responsibility of the institution to pick up and to do something about reducing its impact."[173]

87. We acknowledge, as Universities UK pointed out, that completion rates for UK students remain well above the average for other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).[174] According to the OECD, the UK ranks fifth in terms of first-degree completion rates out of the 23 countries that report these data[175] (which, when the age participation rate is taken into account, results in the UK having one of the highest completion rates per thousand population in the world). There is, however, no room for complacency. We note that the former DIUS was committed to cutting rates of non-completion and that £245.9 million of the HEFCE's £356.3 million widening participation allocations for 2007–08 "were focused directly on improving retention rates".[176] The data may not, however, present the full picture. The English data do not, for example, include part-time students who have higher non-completion rates than full-time students.[177] We were concerned that a recent HEFCE study showed that only 39% of part-time students who began a first degree programme in 1996–97 at a higher

172 Q 395

173 HC 370–i, Q 68

174 Ev 438, para 13; see also Ev 508 (NAO), para 31 ff.

175 DIUS, *Investing in our Future: Departmental Report 2008*, Cm 7392, May 2008, p 70

176 *As above*

177 HEFCE, *Part-time first degree study Entry and completion*, May 2009/18

education institution in the UK (other than the Open University) completed their degree within 11 academic years.[178]

88. When we visited universities during the inquiry we saw that the higher education sector had programmes to help new students adjust and thereby improve retention—for example, courses on essay writing and, in the USA, we were told about pre-admission intensive writing courses, adjustment programmes, counselling and mentoring. **We conclude that higher education institutions should both identify and promote good practice—for example, by systematically collecting and rigorously scrutinising their own non-completion data across years and across subjects, carrying out exit interviews and surveys and by developing further their student personal advice and support systems. We also recommend that the Government investigate the reasons why the non-completion rates of part-time students are higher than those for full-time students and bring forward proposals to reduce the rates.**

89. In its written evidence the University of Leicester made the point that there was "insufficient emphasis on the evaluation of widening participation activity" and said that:

> Much of current evaluation activity tends to focus on counting the volume of activity rather than the achievement of outcomes and student progression. Greater use of quantitative admissions data should be used to gauge success. For example, the evaluation of the £180m Excellence Challenge scheme, an ambitious plan launched at the turn of the decade to secure wider participation and fair access focused heavily on how the money had enabled HEIs to develop additional activity.[179]

We agree with the University. **We recommend that the Government, when evaluating widening participation, examine student progression as well as numbers.**

90. It is also useful to draw attention to the NAO's findings on retention. It said that much of what an institution did was "likely to affect the quality of the student experience and therefore student success and retention. There were two especially important areas where we concluded that an institution can target their work and make a difference. These were:

- getting to know their students and how, generally, they felt about their particular course of study and the culture and amenities offered in the institution; and
- developing a positive approach to retention-related activities that recognised how they could also improve student success, and so attract students to take up services who might otherwise not do so."[180]

The NAO's conclusions rang true with what several students told us.[181] For example, Lucy Davidson told us:

178 HEFCE, *Part-time first degree study Entry and completion*, May 2009/18, para 55

179 Ev 287, para 3; see also Ev 182 (Professor Gorard)

180 Ev 508, para 30

181 As well as the example cited: Q 184 (Ms Donaghy); Q 203 (Mr Sarfo-Kantanka); Q 230 (Mr Raja); Q 237 (Mr Harris); Qq 239 and 251 (Mr Pollard); Q 247 (Mr Harris); HC 370–i, Q 120 (Mr Nussey); HC 370–i, Q 135 (Ms Rowley); HC 370–ii, Q 300 (Mr Andrews); HC 370–ii, Q 324 (Ms Pitt); HC 370–ii, Q 324 (Mr Child); HC 370–ii, Q 325 (Ms Edwards)

> If [the university does not] care about the people within it, you might as well not have any of it. I personally have experienced this. I'm in the first year of my nursing diploma course. My daughter was diagnosed with a very serious illness and that was when I discovered what a good university I am at. My facilitator gave me her mobile phone number, was phoning me at the hospital and I had all the support of the university, support for placement, and it has enabled me to stay on my course. Nursing is something I've wanted to do for ten years. I love it because it's rewarding, it's different every day and you're part of a team. So basically Anglia Ruskin has proved itself to me.[182]

We conclude that one of the main supports to securing wider participation is a comprehensive system of pastoral care and welfare, as well as academic, support for students by each higher education institution. We recommend that the Government place a duty of care on higher education institutions to support their students and require higher education institutions to provide a comprehensive system of pastoral and welfare support for students encompassing, for example, pre-admission courses, adjustment programmes, counselling and mentoring.

Guidance and information

Careers guidance

91. We also asked about the quality of careers guidance. The evidence we received from students about the quality of careers advice gave us grounds for concern when we heard the following:

- They did not encourage me to come to John Moores personally. When I told the careers adviser I was applying for John Moores he said, "I have never heard of that university before." What did the university do to get students to go?[183]
- A lot of the push at our school was […] that they wanted a take of how many students went to Cambridge and Oxford.[184]
- We used to have a careers lesson once a week in that they assessed the current subjects that you were studying for A-level and then pointed you in the direction of which courses were suitable. We also used certain internet websites to help us make a choice. […]My school definitely chose [higher education] first. [The student added that he received no vocational advice.][185]
- [T]he school I was at definitely pushed towards higher education for the majority of students; in the cases where they saw it was not appropriate or there was a sensible other route they would push other people that way, but certainly as far as I was concerned they never really pushed any other options. As far as selection of the

182 Q 225

183 HC 370–i, Q 106

184 HC 370–i, Q 108

185 HC 370–ii, Qq 302–05

> university and the school pushing me towards one or the other, there was not really any help […] They misunderstood what I was going to university for; they thought I wanted to become a mechanic and not an engineer, so consequently tried to push me away from that.[186]

92. Moreover, during our informal meeting with a group of students at Liverpool Hope University one student identified a need for careers service advisers to inform Level 3 NVQ students that this qualification provided an access route to university.[187] When we met students informally at the University of Oxford and Imperial College London we were given a similarly mixed picture. It is worth noting that several students in these groups made the point that an opportunity to visit the university and meet students and tutors was crucial to their decisions to apply to university and even to accept offers from particular universities.[188]

93. Dr Reid, an academic chemist, told us that his department selected from a diverse base of applicants and that the students, "almost invariably, have had very little advice at school level about what subjects to take at A level".[189] He said that they knew they were interested, for example, in studying chemistry but they did not have any mathematics or physics and they had "never been advised at school level that that might be a good idea".[190] The Institute of Physics, in its written memorandum, put these concerns in a wider context:

> The government sets targets for [higher education] participation regardless of the strategic needs of the country. As a consequence, university finances have been driven by the choices of often ill-informed students who have not acquired a coherent set of post-16 qualifications. The outcome has been massive student growth in certain areas, for example drama and media studies, while, as a proportion of all students, science and engineering have fallen. The notion of a "HE market", in which students make decisions based on employment opportunity, is deeply flawed. There is almost no means for any students to obtain neutral and reliable data about career and salary expectations in different subject areas and there is an urgent need for such data.[191]

94. These findings were confirmed by the NAO[192] and the student listening programme set up by DIUS in 2007. Mr Denham told us:

> One of the pieces they did in the beginning was the complaints about poor quality of information, advice and guidance. We were quite surprised […] at the number of students who are now on university courses who were saying they did not have enough advice before they went about what course they were going to do. That is leading to a major piece of work with ourselves and [the Department for Children,

186 HC 370–ii, Q 308

187 Ev 160

188 Ev 162, Ev 158

189 Q 486

190 *As above*

191 Ev 230, para 5

192 Ev 508, para 25

> Schools and Families] looking at the whole issue of information, advice and guidance.[193]

95. We agree with the Institute of Physics. **In our view, it is essential that the strategic needs of the country for STEM graduates are fully taken into account when the Government sets targets for the expansion of higher education. The Government must counteract any tendency within the system propelling young people to study non-STEM subjects which are perceived to make admission to university easier. As we noted in chapter 1, one step it should take is to ensure that any new places funded in higher education institutions meet the strategic needs of the country for STEM graduates.**

96. The other key step is the quality of careers guidance and information available. We were disappointed by the reports of the quality of careers guidance that the students we met had received at school or college. In many cases the advice was neither comprehensive, informative nor useful. This an area that the Leitch Report[194] examined. It pointed out that research published in 2006 had found that when applicants had access to effective careers guidance they tended to make more structured and informed decisions regarding their education. It had also concluded that too few young people at age 14 were making the link between careers guidance and their personal decisions to study certain subjects.[195] We note that DCSF said in its 2008 Annual Report that it would "continue to drive up the standard of careers education in schools through the provision of good practice and training".[196] The evidence we took on careers guidance reflected some of the problems that the Leitch Report appears to have identified and it is too early to form a judgment on the effectiveness of any reforms flowing from Leitch. **We conclude that currently careers guidance to those at many secondary schools is inadequate. We consider that careers guidance needs to start at key stage 3 to advise young people about their choice of GCSEs as this determines post-16 choice, including entry into higher education. While we are aware that, following the Government's acceptance of the recommendation of the Leitch Report changes are planned, we consider that the Government needs to overhaul, extend and improve the careers guidance system urgently and to ensure that young people have access to independent and also to specialist advice from industry and academia, including students. When the changes have been made, we recommend that the Government put in place clear procedures for monitoring the quality of careers guidance in schools and colleges to ensure that the improvement in quality and reach that is required has been achieved.**

Course information

97. In responding to the e-consultation students who considered applying for courses at several universities explained how they reached decisions on which university to apply. The responses included:

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193 Q 539

194 See para 6.

195 HM Treasury, *Leitch review of skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy—world class skills*, Final Report, 2006, para 6.16

196 DCSF, *Departmental Report 2008*, Cm 7391, May 2006, p 47

- consulting a guide such as the Times Good University Guide, in particular the ratings for research, pass rates, student satisfaction and figures about graduate employment;
- for the preferred universities, examination of the entrance criteria, course content, how the course would be taught, contact time and access to tutors and the facilities available; and
- contact with the selected universities either through open days or at interview. When visiting a university one student commented: "[I made] sure I spoke to graduates, teachers, lecturers, current students and people in the world of politics [where] I intend to focus my future career in. I found their opinions very helpful and much more accurate than my peers, [which] played on popular beliefs [and] were easily unfounded.[197]

Code of practice on information for prospective students

98. We looked at a small sample of undergraduate prospectuses available on-line. They appeared to show that little or no information was provided about the nature or degree of contact which students could expect with staff or, for example, how many students would be in a group or who would teach them—academics or research students. Nor did universities appear to give students a clear idea about the work they would be expected to undertake, for example, in terms of numbers of essays, projects or assignments they would undertake during each year of study. From the evidence we took from students and from the published evidence on the study demands placed on students—see paragraph 221 and following—it was clear that time in lectures, tutorials and personal study varied between courses.[198] Whilst that is to be expected, what we found surprising was the variation in student effort required between higher education institutions for similar subjects. In addition, the size of tutorial and lecture groups varied and whether students were taught by academic staff or postgraduate students. All these issues matter to students. The importance of information about time commitments is, for example, critical for mature students. As one pointed out to us: "Getting a clear idea of the hours involved and when lectures would be was incredibly important to me because of child care".[199] **We conclude that it would assist prospective students if higher education institutions presented in a consistent format, which facilitates cross-institutional comparisons, the time a typical undergraduate student could expect to spend in attending lectures and tutorials, in personal study and, for science courses, in laboratories during a week. In addition, universities should indicate the likely size of tutorial groups and the numbers at lectures and the extent to which students may be taught by graduate students. We conclude that the higher education sector should develop a code of practice on information for prospective students setting out the range, quality and level of information that higher education institutions should make available to prospective undergraduate students.** Information about bursaries could also be one of the items

197 Ev 168–69

198 Qq 195–199; HC 370–i, Qq 119–135; HC 370–ii, Q 322; Ev 158–59 (Informal meeting with students at Imperial College London); Ev 160 (Informal meeting with Liverpool Hope students); Ev 164 (Informal meeting with University of Oxford students)

199 HC 370–ii, Q 310 (Ms Edwards)

required to be included by the code of practice on information for prospective students—see paragraph 131.

National Student Survey

99. The National Student Survey, conducted annually since 2005, runs across all publicly funded higher education institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and participating higher education institutions in Scotland. Additionally, since 2008, further education colleges with directly funded higher education students in England[200] have been eligible to participate. The survey asks final year undergraduates and students in their final year of a course leading to undergraduate credits or qualifications to provide feedback on their courses in a nationally recognised format. There are 22 questions, relating to the following aspects of the student learning experience:

- Teaching on My Course
- Assessment and Feedback
- Academic Support
- Organisation and Management
- Learning Resources
- Personal Development
- Overall Satisfaction.[201]

100. **We commend the introduction of the National Student Survey and fully support the concept of seeking the views of students through such a survey.** The Government pointed out that the most recent results from that survey show overall satisfaction remaining above 80%, at 82%.[202] It also cited an NUS student experience survey which "also showed high satisfaction levels—with 85% rating the quality of teaching and learning as good or excellent and 85% pleased they had chosen to attend university".[203] Whilst the overall satisfaction remained above 80% in these surveys, we note that the National Student Survey highlighted areas of concern and courses that received poor ratings by students across the whole higher education sector, including, for example, 33 courses at the 1994 and Russell Groups that were ranked below 2,000 in the survey of 2,175 courses.[204]

101. **We accept that the National Student Survey is a good starting point but caution against an over-reliance on it.** The University of Hertfordshire said that there was "a significant tension" with the National Student Survey being a tool for improvement and also used in league tables. It noted that there were "documented instances of abuse (and probably an additional unknown amount of this activity that is undetected) because

200 See footnote 3.

201 Information taken from the website of the National Student Survey at www.thestudentsurvey.com/.

202 Ev 178, para 39

203 *As above*

204 "Angry students expose worst-taught degrees", *The Sunday Times*, 17 May 2009

moving higher in the league tables might be deemed more important than getting students to reflect fairly on their experience of an institution as part of an enhancement exercise".[205] We noted two instances where it was suggested that universities may be encouraging students filling in the Survey to be positive about the institution.[206] In our view, the results of the National Student Survey should be available to prospective students and the public and we accept that league tables which include the results of the Survey are one of the methods by which the results are given a wider audience. We consider that the tension between use of the Survey as a tool for improvement within the higher education sector and the use of its results in league tables can be reduced by strengthening and guarding its independence and integrity. **We conclude that it is essential to safeguard the independence of the National Student Survey and recommend that the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which has responsibility for the Survey, examine ways to bolster the independence of the survey, including bringing forward arrangements to provide the NUS with a role in promoting the integrity of the Survey.**

League tables

102. The issue of university league tables came up several times during our inquiry. As Gemma Jerome, a student, explained: "It is helpful for students to be able to navigate their way through the application process and have the league tables there to compare institutions".[207] At the end of the student experience—that is at the end of the course—league tables are used to evaluate degrees, as another student, Ed Steward, told us:

> In terms of the quality of the degree a lot of how employers see degrees is dictated by the university league tables, so you have Oxford, Cambridge, UCL and all of that straight down the line. Employers will say a degree from Oxford, perfect, the top university in England, but there is a lot more to it and not enough employers drill down on that data enough to see that in fact a degree in history may be fantastic at Cambridge but a degree in sport sciences may be better from Loughborough. Depending on who you are employing and the background you want them to have, employers need to drill down on the data more and see that even though Loughborough may be further down in the league tables specific degrees from that university may be better than those offered at Oxford. It is a flaw."[208]

103. We noted that HEFCE had commissioned an investigation into league tables and their impact on higher education institutions.[209] In his foreword to the HEFCE Issues Paper published in April 2008 setting out the results of the investigation Professor David Eastwood, the former Chief Executive of HEFCE said:

205 Ev 294, para 16

206 Q 416; "'A hotchpotch of subjectivity' the National Student Survey was a key indicator in the Guardian's university league tables. But is it fair?", *The Guardian*, 19 May 2009

207 HC 370–iii, Q 436

208 HC 370–iii, Q 431

209 HEFCE, *Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England*, Report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), Open University, and Hobsons Research, HEFCE Issues Paper, April 2008/14, p 4

> League tables are part of the higher education landscape and the newspaper calendar. They are one of the sources to which prospective students refer when making choices, and bring attention to important issues such as ‘the student experience’, employability and retention.
>
> The league tables also have a much wider impact—for example, on institutions’ reputations and potentially on the behaviour of academics, businesses and potential benefactors. Governing bodies take an interest in them as a means of assessing institutional performance, sometimes seizing on them in default of other, more sensitive indicators of institutional performance.
>
> There clearly is a demand for league tables, but there are also questions about their quality, impact and possible perverse incentives. Concerns have been raised about the compilers’ choice of indicators, the validity of the methodologies which are employed, the transparency of the processes and the robustness of the rankings. [...] This research throws a considerable amount of light on the approaches and limitations of different league tables and the way universities and colleges respond to them. We hope the debate will lead to improvements to league table methodologies; enable users to better understand the complexities of the league tables, and avoid misunderstanding them; and to help higher education institutions develop approaches that help them satisfy the legitimate information needs of their stakeholders.[210]

League tables also have an international reach as universities in the UK are increasingly compared with institutions across the world and help in attracting overseas students.

104. In our view, it is a case of acknowledging that league tables are a fact of life and we welcome the interest that HEFCE has taken in league tables and their impact on the higher education sector. We have not carried out an exhaustive examination of league tables but on the basis of the evidence we received we offer the following views, conclusions and recommendations as a contribution to the debate on league tables which HEFCE has sought to stimulate and to improve the value of the tables to, and usefulness for, students. **We conclude that league tables are a permanent fixture and recommend that the Government seek to ensure that as much information is available as possible from bodies such as HEFCE and HESA, to make the data they contain meaningful, accurate and comparable.** Where there are shortcomings in the material available we consider that the Government should explore filling the gap. We give two examples. First, the results from the National Student Survey are produced in a format which can be, and is, incorporated into league tables.[211] It appears to us therefore that additional information or factors taken into account in the National Student Survey would flow through to, and assist those consulting, league tables. **To assist people applying to higher education we**

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210 HEFCE, *Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England*, Report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), Open University, and Hobsons Research, HEFCE Issues Paper, April 2008/14

211 “Good University Guide 2010: How the tables work”, The Times, 3 June 2009, stated: “The National Student Survey (NSS) was the source of the Student Satisfaction data. This was an initiative undertaken by the Funding Councils for England, Northern Ireland and Wales designed, as an element of the quality assurance for higher education, to inform prospective students and their advisers in choosing what and where to study. The survey encompasses the views of final year students on the quality of their courses”.

recommend that the Government seek to expand the National Student Survey to incorporate factors which play a significant part in prospective applicants' decisions—for example, the extent to which institutions encourage students to engage in non-curricula activities and work experience and offer careers advice.

105. Second, Professor Driscoll from Middlesex University considered that league tables neglected "the contribution that universities that have focused on widening participation, like Middlesex, make to raising skills and educational levels in this country".[212] In other words, the National Student Survey as presently constituted does not assess the "value added" offered by individual institutions. **We recommend that the Government produce a metric to measure higher education institutions' contribution to widening participation, use the metric to measure the contribution made by institutions and publish the results in a form which could be incorporated into university league tables.**

212 Q 416

3 Resources and financial issues

Introduction

106. In its memorandum to our inquiry the Government asserted that lack of financial support should "not present a barrier to students who have the ability and wish to study in higher education", that there was a "generous package of support available in the form of grants and loans" and that "no eligible full-time student has to pay their fees before or during their studies".[213] In addition, all students are able to apply for a loan to meet their full variable tuition fees.[214]

107. The taxpayer via the Government assists students with the costs of higher education though loans and grants. In addition, universities in England provide undergraduate student bursaries. All eligible[215] full-time students can obtain assistance with tuition fees and living costs through student loans. Students can take out two loans per academic year: a student loan for tuition fees, to cover the cost of tuition fees in full; and a student loan for maintenance, to assist with accommodation and other living costs, the size of which depends on household income. Both forms of student loan have to be paid back but, unlike most conventional debts, repayments only start when a student has completed the course and earns over £15,000. In addition to loans, the Government has estimated that around a third of new students are expected to qualify for the full Maintenance Grant or Special Support Grant, and around a further third for a partial grant. Grants do not have to be repaid. Students may also qualify for extra help on top of student loans, grants and bursaries if they are disabled, or have a mental health condition or specific learning difficulty. Moreover, extra help may also be available if a child or an adult depends on the student financially.[216]

108. The main sources of financial help for part-time students are different from those available to full-time students. Depending on a student's circumstances, he or she may be able to apply for the part-time Fee Grant and Course Grant. How much the student will obtain depends on household income and personal circumstances.[217]

213 Ev 175, para 13

214 Ev 175, para 13

215 Regulations are made annually by the Secretary of State to make provision for the payment of grants and loans to eligible students in connection with their undertaking or attendance on designated higher education courses. For the academic year starting in October 2009 the Education (Student Support) (No. 2) Regulations 2008 (S.I. 2008/1582) as amended by the Education (Student Support) (Amendment)(No.2) Regulations 2008 (S.I.2008/2094) and the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) (No.3) Regulations 2008 (S.I.2008/2939) make provisions and provision is made for the academic year starting in October 2010 in the Education (Student Support) Regulations 2009 (S.I. 2009/1959). The eligibility criteria include "personal" criteria—where the prospective student is "ordinarily resident", whether he or she has taken a higher education course before and age—and "course and institution eligibility" criteria.

216 DIUS, *How to get financial help as a student, Get the Facts on Student Finance, Information about Higher Education*, February 2009; supplemented with information from "Student finance: an introduction" from the directgov website: www.direct.gov.uk/en/index.htm

217 *As above*

Tuition fees

109. The Higher Education Act 2004 introduced variable ("top-up") tuition fees for higher education institutions in England. This new regime allowed higher education institutions to charge tuition fees of any amount up to £3,000 (increasing annually in line with inflation). At the time this policy was being debated there was considerable concern that the amount of debt new graduates would be faced with could dissuade some potential students from entering higher education altogether. Thus, as part of the debate, the Government decided to establish the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to oversee the introduction of fees with the intention of ensuring that such dissuasion did not occur.[218] The term *variable* has turned out so far to have been something of a misnomer. As Professor Brown, Vice-Chancellor of Liverpool John Moores University, put it: "everybody topped up so it is not really a top-up fee, it is the new fee".[219] (We know of one exception, Leeds Metropolitan University which from 2006 set its fees at £2,000.[220] But we note press reports that this policy may be under review in the face of financial pressures.[221])

110. When he gave evidence to the Committee, John Denham confirmed that the Government would review higher education fees and funding in 2009–10, though he did not provide a detailed timetable.[222] **We have deliberately not set out to review the question of tuition fees and we make no recommendation as to the level at which variable tuition fees should be capped or whether they should be abolished. Tuition fees came up at several points during our inquiry and we set out below observations which we hope will inform the review of fees.**

111. Most universities in England charge the maximum fee permitted—in 2008–09 this was for most undergraduate students £3,145. We asked students about their views on fees.[223] **Though we received anecdotal views that some people may have been discouraged from applying to university, we note that the students whom we met or took evidence from were not pressing concerns that fees set at £3,145 across almost all universities were deterring full-time students from applying to university.** One student, Edward Nussey, added a word of caution: "When I applied to university, I have got older brothers and they were on the old scheme, and the fact that the costs had gone up did not really come to me that it would be an issue. I just accepted it and went into education and I think it will only hit home when I have to pay it off."[224]

112. What we did see was some greater appreciation of the costs of higher education and focus on the value for money provided by higher education institutions. For example, in the e-consultation some students queried whether they were obtaining value for money for

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218 Higher Education Act 2004, Part 3

219 HC 370–i, Q 47

220 "Leeds Metropolitan University; University guide 2006", *The Sunday Times*, 10 September 2006

221 "Leeds Met fees set to rise after v-c resigns", *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 22 January 2009; "Jobs at risk as Leeds Met faces £7m shortfall", *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 15 May 2009; we note that the University of Greenwich also set its fees below the maximum permitted: £2,900 in 2008–09.

222 Q 496; see also para 8.

223 HC 370–i, Q 136; HC 370–ii, Qq 360–63; Ev 157–58 (Informal meeting with students at Imperial College London); Ev 160 (Informal meeting with Liverpool Hope students); Ev 163–64 (Informal meeting with University of Oxford students)

224 HC 370–i, Q 140

their tuition fees. One said that he could "not find £3,000 worth of value in my course, and I have not received that level of learning back" but explained that "paying the £3000+ fees doesn't really annoy as the payback system is quite good once graduates have received a job".[225] As some students from whom we took evidence had started their studies under the old fees arrangements they were able to make observations on the effects of the increase. Adam Hodgson, a student paying at the old rate, noted that the students in the year below were paying twice the amount and commented that there was:

> absolutely no visible difference as to the kind of university experience they are getting. They get the same amount of lectures, they get the same lecturers, they get the same amount of support, so I would be hesitant to support in any way increasing those fees because I do not see how that would benefit any student at all. I have not seen the benefit between the £1,200 fees to the £3,000 fees.[226]

Others were concerned that fees set following the review at, say, £6,000 or £7,000 would deter applicants.[227]

113. **We detected no evidence that variable tuition fees at current levels were driving up quality on campus, which is not surprising given that the fees hardly vary across the higher education sector and so provide little incentive for students to look for value for money between institutions. We found some concerns that applicants might be deterred if the review of fees led to a steep increase in fees.**

114. We noted that some Vice-Chancellors have floated,[228] and that Universities UK has modelled,[229] the possibility of substantial increases in tuition fees. **We recommend that in its consultation on the review of fees the Government seeks to commission and publish independent research to provide for a detailed and informed debate and consultation on the matter, in particular into the impact of a higher cap on course quality and applications. We further recommend that any higher education institution seeking to increase its fees provide detailed evidence to support its proposals.**

115. Nor—for the same reason as stated above—were we able to form a view on the effects of variable fees on student engagement with their studies and higher education institutions. A student, Gemma Jerome, summarised two possible effects:

> I think that there is a connection between students' engagement in education and the money they are putting into it. If you work out that you are paying £25 a lecture maybe you are less likely to miss one. The fact that we do as students—maybe it is our parents, maybe it is through a bursary or maybe it is through a grant—pay for our education means that there is a problem of seeing ourselves as consumers. I know that that can go either way, negative or positive, and usually somewhere in the middle. If you see yourself more as a consumer, are you less likely to play a part in

225 Ev 170; see also HC 370–iii, Q 416

226 HC 370–i, Q 136

227 HC 370–i, Q136 (Ms Rowley); see also HC 370–ii, Q 360 (Ms Tye); HC 370–ii, Q 362 (Mr Child).

228 "Oxford University losing £8,000 per student", *The Guardian*, 27 April 2009; "Top universities say tuition fee limits are damaging institutions", *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 29 April 2009

229 Universities UK, *Changing landscapes: future scenarios for variable tuition fees*, March 2009

> the decision-making process or do you see it as the duty of your institution to make decisions on your behalf because you are paying for them to do that?[230]

116. Towards the end of our inquiry the NUS produced a policy document[231] about the future funding of higher education, in which they argued against a system based on fees with deferred repayments, as at present, and in favour, effectively, of a graduate tax that would endow a "People's Trust for higher education". We do not here comment on the merits of the NUS policy, but we do agree with them that the review of fees should look more widely at the alternative methods of securing the funds. **We recommend the Government's review of fees look at the alternative methods of securing the funds needed to sustain a strong higher education sector and should not be concerned exclusively with the appropriate level of fees within the current structure.**

Student indebtedness

117. A key question which the review of fees will have to address is the level of indebtedness—arising from loans for fees and living expenses—with which students leave university. Dr Hood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, considered that insufficient time was spent on the "question of what is an appropriate level of total indebtedness for a student who comes through our degree programmes to graduate with? That is a discussion that very much should be to the fore when the question of any increase in fees is discussed".[232] He said that once the level of indebtedness was settled other issues could become "self-defining" and, for example, "bursary programmes are going to complement the indebtedness".[233] (We deal with bursaries below.) **In our view the student and the level of debt he or she could reasonably be expected to incur has to be a central question for the forthcoming review of fees.**

Student indebtedness and fees in the USA

118. We found that our visit to the USA was educative on fees and indebtedness. We became more apprehensive after the visit if the American fee structures and level of student indebtedness were to become the norm in this country. In the USA annual tuition fees range from \$3,500[234] to \$36,000.[235] With the addition of living costs at \$15,000 per year, a student after the usual four year course in the USA can therefore graduate with a debt of over \$200,000. Unlike this country, the debt is financed by loans from the banking sector at market interest rates accruing from the day the debt is incurred. We were told of four deleterious consequences:

a) graduating students gravitated towards professions that offered the largest salaries and therefore speediest debt reduction—typically the law and, until recently, financial services;

230 HC 370–i, Q 136

231 *Funding Our Future Blueprint: Summary Report; for an alternative higher education funding system*, NUS, June 2009

232 HC 370–ii, Q 199

233 *As above*

234 For in-state students at a community college

235 For example, at Georgetown University and George Washington University

b) science and professions such as teaching with lower starting salaries were neglected with the consequence that places on science courses were often filled by overseas students, and government had to finance incentives for students to enter public service, such as debt remission;

c) the banks had become vested interests within the higher education sector resisting change because in setting up the system the Federal Government had provided guarantees to the banks with the consequence that student loans were very profitable and almost risk free—it was estimated that if banks were removed from the system of support the Federal Government could save $100 million; and

d) in the face of the recession some private universities were dropping what the Americans call "needs blind" admissions, that is, selection of applicants that took no account of ability to pay, and that progress in widening access in these universities could be halted.

119. We should record one other aspect of the US system. The wide range of fees appeared to lead many students to start at (the less expensive) community colleges and then after two years transfer to a state university. Others studied for a period, left and then came back when they could afford the fees with the credits they had previously earned to continue their studies in higher education, so elongating the duration of their studies.[236] We offer these observations on the US system to be fed into the debate on the review of fees.

Recommendations in respect of the fees review

120. We have not set out to establish whether the introduction of variable fees in England has acted as a deterrent to applications to higher education; nor did we seek evidence on this matter. As we have noted fees have hardly varied as nearly all higher education institutions have charged the maximum amount and the number of applications have increased—significantly in 2009, as we note in paragraphs 12 to 20. We also note that there has been an attempt to mitigate the effects of the increased tuition fees by significant support such as grants and loans as well as the subsidised interest rate on loans. The Government will, however, as part of the review of fees need to examine whether changes in the level of fees has a deterrent on applications to higher education, and in particular on applications from those from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. **We recommend that the Government commission independent research into the effects of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006 and into further increases in fees on applications to higher education from those from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. We further recommend that this research be commissioned and published in time to inform the review of fees. As part of the review of fees the Government needs to indicate as part of its vision for higher education over the next 15 years at what level it wants to see tuition fees reach, if it is to persist with the current fee regime. If its objective is to raise the cap on fees significantly towards levels that the market will determine it needs to explain how it will ensure that the deleterious effects we saw in the USA are to be avoided.**

236 This Report deals with credit accumulation and transfer and community colleges at paragraph 81 ff.

Bursaries

121. A condition of charging higher fees from 2006 was that higher education institutions should invest a proportion of their additional fee income in additional access measures, primarily bursaries, to attract applications from low income and other under-represented groups.[237] The minimum level of bursary is the difference between the maximum state support a student can get (through, for example, Higher Education Maintenance Grant and Special Support Grant) and the fee level set by the institution. Thus when variable tuition fees were introduced, institutions, in most cases, were required to offer at least £300 bursaries to those in need. Most bursaries are means-tested on the student's parents' income (unless the student is over 25) and so most students will not qualify for any bursary support. Like grants, bursaries do not have to be repaid. Universities' access agreements do not have to specify the exact mechanics of how their bursaries will work, but they have to specify whether it will be in the form of fee remission or "cash-in-hand" to the student and how eligibility will be determined.[238] The thresholds used for eligibility[239] for, and calculating, bursaries have been increased annually. The current rates are set out in the box below.

Box 2: Fee and grant rates for 2008–09[240]

Basic tuition fee £1,255	Maximum higher tuition fee payable £3,145
Higher Education Maintenance Grant/Special Support Grant £2,835	

122. In 2007–08, a typical annual bursary for a student on full state support at a higher education institution was around £1,000 but the range ran from £305 to £3,100. Of higher education institutions charging the full fee (£3,145), 84% were offering bursaries to students above the statutory level for students on full state support (72% also offered bursaries to students in partial state support while 11% defined their own threshold levels).[241] Institutions have used the flexibility to provide a range of bursaries—and this was confirmed by the universities we visited.[242] We heard evidence that bursaries had made a considerable difference, which implied to us that the base level of student support (through loans and grants) was insufficient to provide adequately for students' needs. Lucy Davidson, who was studying nursing at Anglia Ruskin, told us:

> there's a lot of girls on my course where if you were to take the bursary away you would lose all the nurses. We would all walk because we have children, childcare and

237 OFFA, *Access agreement monitoring Outcomes for 2006–07*, January 2008/01, para 3

238 OFFA, *Producing Access Agreements: OFFA guidance to institutions*, November 2004/01, para 42

239 See footnote 215

240 OFFA, *Annual Report 2007–08, Presented to Parliament pursuant to schedule 5 sections 7 (3) and 8 (2) of the Higher Education Act 2004*, 2008 p 11 and OFFA, *OFFA guidance on reviewing access agreements following revised income threshold levels for maintenance grants from 2008–09*, 2 August 2007, annex C

241 OFFA, *Annual Report 2007–08, Presented to Parliament pursuant to schedule 5 sections 7 (3) and 8 (2) of the Higher Education Act 2004*, 2008, p 11

242 HC 370–i, Q 54; HC 370–ii, Q 196

> petrol to pay for and my bursary pays my childcare and my petrol […] without it I couldn't do the course.[243]

123. Other submissions were critical of the present bursary arrangements.[244] The NUS, for example, said:

> we've got a widely variable bursary scheme where in Million+ [group of universities], for example, the average annual bursary awarded in 2006/7 was just £680; in Russell Group universities it was £1,790 and the issue is this: you could have one student at the University of Cambridge with exactly the same financial needs and experience as someone at the university down the road, at Anglia Ruskin. One will have an all-singing, all-dancing bursaries package which will help them out through their hardship at Cambridge and the other one will have a less generous bursary for Anglia Ruskin. That is not because Anglia Ruskin is mean-fisted, it is because they are more successful at widening participation.[245]

Student support, widening participation and fair access

124. We consider that the Government needs to be clear about the purpose of bursaries and to be able to show the benefit of the arrangements in terms of public policy. We identified three possible purposes for public policy in this area: (1) student support and the alleviation of need; (2) widening participation; and (3) making access fairer.

125. If the purpose is student support, NUS's criticisms have identified a weakness with the current arrangements. If bursaries are regarded as part of the student support arrangements, whose purpose is primarily to alleviate student need, then it seems to us anomalous that a student with lesser need, who happens to attend a university with few poor students, should receive more by way of support than another with greater need at a different university. **We conclude that the current bursary arrangements cannot be justified on the grounds of equitably matching student support with student needs.**

126. Similar considerations appear to apply to widening participation. In an evidence session last year Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access at OFFA, told us that one of his roles was to make sure there was "the most generous possible support" for those from families with low incomes in terms of support both from the Government and through the bursary systems from individual universities.[246] He also explained that when the legislation that became the Higher Education Act 2004 was under consideration there was a fear that there would be a substantial reduction in applications from lower socio-economic groups but that this had not happened. Sir Martin pointed out that "the proportion of students

243 HC 370–ii, Q 269

244 Q 227 (Ms Jerome); Q 270 (Mr Topazio, Mr Raja and Mr Harris); Ev 167 (E-Consultation); Ev 314 (Million+); Ev 499 (UCU), para 26; see also Ev 511 (NAO), paras 43–45.

245 Q 149

246 Oral evidence taken before the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee on the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) on 2 June 2008, HC (2007–08), 598-i Q 21

from the poorer groups has not fallen".[247] Although he did not claim that OFFA was wholly responsible, he said that it was "certainly a contributor".[248]

127. The assessment underlying Sir Martin's view appears to be that the bursary system has prevented the introduction of variable fees leading to a significant deterioration in the proportion of those entering higher education from poorer socio-economic groups and that bursaries can be used as a tool to widen participation. We have not, however, in this inquiry carried out a detailed examination of the effects of the present bursary arrangements on widening participation, although, in our view, they cannot meet Sir Martin's call for "the most generous possible support" for those from families with low incomes, because the amount of support a student receives does not depend on his or her needs, or the means of his or her parents, but on which university the student attends and how many other students from poor backgrounds attend that university. **We conclude that the current bursary arrangements, which have led to large variations between higher education institutions in support for students with similar needs, cannot be justified on the grounds of widening participation in higher education.**

128. On fair access, we found no evidence that the present bursary arrangements have led to more students from poor backgrounds attending those universities that offer the highest bursaries (which are the most selective universities and the ones for whom fair access is an issue). According to the published performance indicators in 2005–06 (before bursaries were introduced) 20.4% of students at universities in England in the 1994 and Russell Groups were from the poorer socio-economic groups. In 2006–07 (the first year of the new bursary arrangements) the proportion had reduced to 20.2%, and in 2007–08 it had continued to reduce to 20.0%.[249] We note that Sir Martin Harris said in February 2009 that:

> all current evidence suggests that the choice of whether or not to go into [higher education] at 18, or whether to choose a particular institution, is not determined primarily financially, least of all by the precise financial package available at that point. The money is not what motivates people. Their decisions are made for other reasons and often very much earlier than at age 18. Choices are made, largely unconsciously, in families, among peer groups, and usually in 11–16 schools.[250]

It appears to us that bursaries have not improved fair access to the most selective universities.

129. **We conclude that the present bursary arrangements do not contribute to the national policies of widening participation or fair access. Nor are they an instrument to maximise the affordability of higher education for students from poor backgrounds, which, in our view, is what student support arrangements should be concerned with.**

247 *As above*

248 Oral evidence taken before the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee on the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) on 2 June 2008, HC (2007–08) 598–i, Q 4

249 "Table T1b - Participation of under-represented groups in higher education: Young full-time undergraduate entrants 2005/06", "Table T1b - Participation of under-represented groups in higher education: Young full-time undergraduate entrants 2006/07", "Table T1b - Participation of under-represented groups in higher education: Young full-time undergraduate entrants 2007/08", HESA, www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1434&Itemid=141

250 Record of HEPI Seminar at the House of Commons Seminar, *Fair Access Revisited*, 24 February 2009 at www.hepi.ac.uk/downloads/Fairaccessrevisited.doc

Information about bursaries

130. OFFA's *Access Agreement Monitoring Report: Outcomes for 2007–08* showed that 25% of higher education institutions spent less than 90% of the expenditure that they had predicted to spend on financial support for lower income students.[251] We found evidence that students were not aware of bursaries. Steve Topazio, a former student, told us that he did not know about the bursaries until his final year "when the NUS told me they existed and that [our university had under-spent] by a few hundred thousand pounds, so obviously it wasn't a big issue for the university".[252] This point was echoed in the e-consultation where one student said: "the possible sources of Grants and Bursaries were never made clear with the exception of from the Armed Forces, whose bursaries are well publicised. Also, Universities don't necessarily make 'all' of the costs of a degree known, Books and Field Trips for example are […] not mentioned".[253] Another said that bursaries "were something I was less clear on, and I was somewhat bemused that students in certain faculties get bursaries at my university whilst others do not".[254] NUS said that the current bursary arrangements were "complex, and create difficulties for students in making comparisons between different packages of financial support on offer at different institutions."[255]

131. We take the view that it is essential that those considering applying to higher education are made aware of the full financial support, including bursaries, that is available and to be able to have an accurate idea of the costs of attending university. **If, following the review of fees, bursaries remain to be set by each institution, we conclude that all higher education institutions must ensure that prospective students are made aware of the bursaries available and can easily establish eligibility and calculate an indicative level of bursary and that at least basic information about a specific institution's approach is provided as part of its pre-admission documentation provided to applicants.** (Information about bursaries could also be one of the items required to be included by the code of practice on information for prospective students—see paragraph 98.)

National bursary system

132. The key issue on bursaries is whether the current arrangements should be replaced with a national bursary system. NUS favoured a national bursary system, and it was noteworthy that the question of a national bursary system was about the only major issue on which we detected significant disagreement between the groups representing higher education institutions.

- The 1994 and Russell Groups opposed a national bursary system which transferred resources generated from additional fee income by one university to provide bursaries for students at other institutions. Professor Grant from the Russell Group challenged the view "that the way of rectifying the inequality of bursaries was to remove money

251 OFFA, *Access agreement monitoring Outcomes for 2007–08*, March 2009/02

252 Q 270

253 Ev 167

254 *As above*

255 Ev 262, para 14

from those institutions who were paying higher bursaries and to transfer it to those institutions who were paying lower bursaries. In other words, I would need to explain to students coming to UCL that part of their fee being paid to UCL would be paid to support education at UCL and part would be paid to support education elsewhere. Have a national bursary scheme—yes. Do not have a cross-transfer which runs completely contrary to the whole point of introducing variable tuition fees.”[256]

- Million+ was in favour of a national bursary system and took a view similar to that of NUS. It told us: “It is completely preposterous that students get a size of bursary not depending on their need but depending on which university they go to. It is as logical as getting a different-sized pension depending on which post office you go to.”[257] The University Alliance,[258] GuildHE[259] and the 157 Group[260] also supported a national bursary system.

133. **The Russell and 1994 Groups put to us their strong belief that all the additional fee income “belongs to” their member institutions and can only be spent on “their” students. This is not, in our view, a principle that is either demonstrable or sustainable.**

134. Critics of the present arrangements—the NUS[261] and the majority of universities[262]—have argued for a national bursary. A national bursary scheme would ensure that students across England would receive the same level of bursary based on need irrespective of the university they attended or the number of students from a similar background at the university they attend. We consider therefore that, in contrast to the current variable bursary arrangements, a national bursary scheme would appear to be able to meet the Government’s policy objectives of widening participation and alleviating student hardship. It would also have the benefit of making eligibility for bursaries more transparent.

135. When we asked the former Secretary of State, John Denham, about bursaries, he explained that the idea of the present bursary scheme was:

> to allow institutions to vary the bursary; that was the whole idea of it when people could experiment with whether they wanted to attract particular types of students or support particular types of students, have a heavier weighting in one area or another. It was the idea of being able to see how a more varied bursary system would develop that lay behind the original rejection of a national bursary scheme. My own view is that this has to be one of the issues that we put into the fees and funding review later this year because we do need to allow people to assess what is the evidence. If people have particular types of structures and they said were going to attract this type of student, has it actually worked and has it delivered what people wanted.[263]

256 Q 64

257 Q 64 (Professor Ebdon)

258 Q 119 (Professor Craven)

259 Q 118

260 Q 119 (Ms Bacon)

261 Q 149 and Ev 262, para 14–15

262 Q 64 (Professor Ebdon, Million+); Q 118 (Professor Baker, GuildHE); Q 119 (Professor Craven, University Alliance)

263 Q 528

136. We consider that the former Secretary of State is right that the question of bursaries and the question of student support needs to be part of the review of fees and we hope the review will approach this question from the perspective of student need, not institutional strategy. We consider that the forthcoming review of fees should comprehensively examine student need and support in higher education. **We recommend that the Government include in the terms of reference of the forthcoming review of fees two key guiding principles. First, student need, rather than the characteristics of the university that the student attends, should determine the support that students receive. Second, any arrangements such as bursary arrangements recommended by the review must be shown to contribute to the national policies both of widening participation and fair access.** Any arrangements based on these principles will ensure that student support is available to students in higher education institutions across the county in an equitable manner determined according to their need.

137. We consider that it follows from these principles that those universities with small numbers of poor students should provide a fair share of their fee income towards the support of students from poor backgrounds wherever they may be in the higher education sector. A national bursary based on student need financed by contributions drawn from all higher education institutions and allocating bursaries based on need would meet the principles we set out. **We consider that a national bursary scheme should also enable students to calculate the total level of support they could expect when making applications to higher education institutions. We favour a national bursary scheme, which would set a realistic national minimum bursary for all students across England. We recommend that the Government draw up and publish as part of the review of fees, and invite comments on, a national bursary scheme. We recommend that the indicative scheme set national minimum amounts for bursaries calculated on the basis of need to which all students in higher education institutions in England would be eligible to apply.**

138. We have not taken evidence on the detailed operation of a national bursary scheme. We identified two issues that will need to be addressed in any examination of a national bursary scheme during the review of fees: (1) the risk of duplicating the current arrangements; and (2) the consequences of fees becoming truly variable.

139. On the first issue, when we put the idea of a national bursary scheme to the former Secretary of State, he said that a national scheme would "become indistinguishable from add-ons to student financial support and it would not be clear why you were bothering to have two mechanisms delivering the one outcome".[264] We consider that he has a point. **We acknowledge that a national bursary system that duplicated the existing student grant arrangements may not be the best way to proceed. We consider that, if the Government can show that the principles we have set out above can be effectively met by another route—for example, by a redistributive mechanism pooling a percentage of each higher education institution's fee income and redistributing it as additional grant—then that may be a more sensible way forward.**

264 *As above*

140. As we have noted at paragraph 109, until now nearly all higher education institutions have charged the same fees and they have not varied. This may, however, change after the review of fees. If there were to be a significant increase and differentiation in tuition fees between institutions, the Government would have to assess, as part of the review of fees, whether the minimum national bursary should have an addition linked to the fees charged by an institution and raised directly from the variable tuition fees charged by the institution. Alternatively, the Government could require those institutions charging the higher fees to select students on a "needs blind" basis and provide to those in receipt of national bursaries additional bursaries to meet the costs of the higher fees. **If following the review, fees vary significantly, it is essential that students from poor backgrounds have no financial disincentive from attending high-fee institutions and we conclude that the review of fees should ensure that there are arrangements to provide these students with adequate financial support. Such arrangements could include an addition above the national minimum bursary or a top-up bursary provided by the institution charging the higher fees.**

141. Finally, the arrangements we suggest in this section would not preclude universities—nor should they, in our view—from providing support to students out of the fee income that they receive, or from other resources through bursaries or scholarships.

Part-time and mature students

UKCES 2009 Report on Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK

142. In April 2009 the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) published its assessment of progress towards making the UK a world leader in skills, employment and productivity by 2020.[265] The Government's aim is for the UK to become one of the top eight countries in the world for skills, jobs and productivity.[266] The UKCES report cites the Global Competitiveness Report, produced by the World Economic Forum, which ranks countries according to a range of measures and on the basis of a "global competitiveness" index. The Forum currently rates the UK economy as the 12th most competitive in the world, a fall of three places from the previous year. The UKCES report noted, on the most relevant measures contributing to this index, that the UK was ranked 8th on labour market efficiency and 18th on higher education and training. The UKCES report points out that the:

> "Higher education and training" [measure] includes a range of eight indicators including secondary and tertiary enrolment; measures of quality (based on an executive opinion survey); and staff training. On all bar one, the UK is adjudged to be at a "competitive disadvantage". Indeed, an "inadequately educated workforce" is

265 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, *The 2009 Report on Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK*, April 2009

266 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, *The 2009 Report on Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK*, April 2009, p 3

> identified in the survey as the fourth most problematic factor for doing business in the UK.[267]

143. The Government's strategy to make the UK a world leader in skills, employment and productivity by 2020 rests on implementing for England the targets in the Leitch Report,[268] which includes delivering improved higher skill levels by broadening learning opportunities beyond traditional full-time provision, improving the interaction between higher education institutions and employers, and driving up teaching quality and individual choice.[269]

Other countries

144. During the inquiry it became clear to us that other countries are not going to remain at the same speed and allow the UK to overtake them. When we visited the USA in April 2009 we found that changes were underway. President Obama, in a speech at Georgetown University on 14 April 2009, made it clear that he wanted to see an education system that "prepares our workers for a 21st century economy". He explained that in:

> the 20th century, the GI Bill[270] sent a generation to college, and for decades, we led the world in education and economic growth. But in this new economy, we trail the world's leaders in graduation rates and achievement. That is why we have set a goal that will greatly enhance our ability to compete for the high-wage, high-tech jobs of the 21st century: by 2020, America will once more have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.
>
> To meet that goal, we have already dramatically expanded early childhood education. We are investing in innovative programs that have proven to help schools meet high standards and close achievement gaps. We are creating new rewards tied to teacher performance and new pathways for advancement. I have asked every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training, and we have provided tax credits to make a college education more affordable for every American.[271]

Support for mature and part-time students

145. As we have noted,[272] part-time students are ineligible for the same level of fee or maintenance support that full-time students can obtain. The 157 Group pointed out, as

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267 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, *The 2009 Report on Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK*, April 2009, para 1.2.2

268 HM Treasury, *Leitch review of skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy—world class skills*, Final report, 2006; see also DIUS, *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England,* Cm 7181, July 2007, DIUS, *Investing in our Future: Departmental Report 2008*, Cm 7392, May 2008; and see para 6.

269 UK Commission for Employment and Skills, *The 2009 Report on Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK*, April 2009, para 2.3

270 The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, known as the GI Bill provided college and vocational education for US soldiers returning from the Second World War.

271 Obama's Remarks on the Economy, *New York Times*, 14 April 2009

272 At para 108

already mentioned,[273] that three-quarters of the funding in 2010–2011 would "go on full-time 17 to 20-year-olds",[274] and thus the remaining quarter supports other part-time students under 21 and part-time and mature students over 21 years of age. Part-time and mature students have, however, an additional source of support—employers—but as the 157 Group noted only "half of employed students in full-time work and therefore studying part-time are actually supported by the employers, and then usually only fees—nothing else".[275] The Group said that it had students saying to its colleges: "'Please don't tell our employers that we are studying', because that may not go down very well".[276] The Birkbeck Students' Union made the point that the part-time sector needed to be funded on the same basis as the full-time sector because "part-time institutions require full-time services, buildings, student support and libraries".[277] It also condemned the negative impact on both students' opportunities and universities' admissions policies which the withdrawal of funding by the Government had caused for those wishing to study an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQs) to that they had already obtained. The Students' Union said that in some instances the problem also affected "students seeking to take a higher qualification when they are not suitable for admission, or entering a course which is exempted by the Government and seeking at a later stage to covertly switch into the ELQ-affected modules".[278]

The position of part-time and mature students in higher education

146. Professor Longden of Liverpool Hope who, with his colleague Professor Yorke from the University of Lancaster, had examined the position of part-time students told us that many of the part-time students he surveyed felt that they were "invisible" and that they were treated as if they were "full time".[279] Professor Yorke said that he had been examining:

> foundation degrees, where people do quite a lot of stuff in the workplace as well as in the education institution, and you begin to get the response from students that as much as they are getting out of this bonding with others is the strength they get from working with other people. That helps and sustains them and helps develop self-esteem, and all the things that go with that. It does happen, but I think probably the way you go about the teaching and learning, and the student experience issue, plays a part in doing that. If you just bring people in and lecture them and then they go away again, they are not going to have much chance of making that bonding. If they work in a group kind of way they are much more likely to make that kind of bonding.[280]

Edward Nussey, a student, echoed Professor Yorke's findings. He told us that he was involved in sport within the university and that "mature students and part-time students who have made commitments toward sport have benefited everyone in the club, no

273 At para 37

274 Q 80

275 Q 117 (Ms Bacon)

276 Q 117 (Ms Bacon)

277 Ev 217

278 Ev 218, para 11

279 HC 370–i, Q 78

280 HC 370–i, Q 80

question, because it just brings a wealth of experience and knowledge about several areas that help the university."[281]

Changes to assist part-time and mature students

147. Professor Baker from GuildHE considered that part-time students had a "raw deal because we are still stuck in a mindset that assumes that the vast majority of students are full-time and 18 years old.[282] He said that "life simply is not like that" and he hoped that the sector could "move away from a division between full-time and part-time and just call them students who are learning in different modes."[283] Professor Craven from the University Alliance said that to "make it much more flexible for students to be able to complete a course, sometimes doing what one would call a full-time load and sometimes not doing a full-time load, is very important. That is something the fees review [...] has to look into, to make that more flexible."[284] The Birkbeck Students' Union also made the point that flexibility was important, "particularly with more mature students and part-time students who are juggling care and responsibilities, full-time jobs, and also if you are travelling a long distance onto a campus."[285]

148. Some of the changes underway in higher education look likely to assist part-time and mature students. Professor Burgess explained that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) (see paragraph 261 and following) would meet "the requirements of portability and flexibility" and that it would "suit part-time students because you would be able to have a running record of what you had achieved. [...] I think in that sense we have looked at something which suits the contemporary university with the way in which students go along different routes, full-time, part-time, modular, and so on."[286] We were also pleased to note that employers had detected more flexibility in the sector. John Harris from SEMTA said that when universities were able to deliver learning in a flexible, part-time way, this was "obviously to the advantage of the employee and the employer. In fairness to universities, they are responding to that. There is a big change going on."[287]

149. We were, however, reminded by Professor Roger Brown that "flexibility always costs more money".[288] He pointed out, for example, that if universities adopted a credit accumulation and transfer system, the examination of which we recommend at paragraph 84, or "if you have more teaching in the evenings and you have people working at weekends it all adds up to money and it increases the demands on the universities and it is not at all clear where that resource will come from."[289]

281 HC 370–i, Q 142

282 Q 117 (Professor Baker)

283 Q 117 (Professor Baker)

284 Q 117 (Professor Craven)

285 Q 124

286 Q 320

287 HC 370–iii, Q 395

288 Q 394

289 *As above*

150. One of the students on the panel, Ricky Chotai, who came back to give evidence in April raised a concern about the effect of the review of fees on sandwich degrees. He asked whether universities would still be charging the full amount or would they be charging 50% for the one year in a four-year course in which the student was placed in industry. Speculating on an annual fee set at £9,000 he said that 50% of £9,000 was £4,500, "which is a lot of money for a year in industry" when "the wages during that year in industry are pretty much minimum wage, and taking into account fees as well, it is a deep consideration for students when they are looking to apply."[290]

Conclusions on part-time and mature students

151. We have welcomed John Denham's desire to create a framework for higher education over the next 10 to 15 years, and we hope that the Machinery of Government changes do not lead to a delay in the framework's publication. An essential part of that framework will be how it contributes to Ambition 2020 and, in particular, to the provision for part-time students who will play a critical part in meeting those objectives. The higher education sector has shown that it can respond to the needs of part-time students—though as we identify at paragraph 147 and following, there are systematic problems that it still needs to address—but that is the first stage of the journey to Ambition 2020. If as a country we wish to improve the skills, and reskill, a significant proportion of the adult population we need to start changing the framework of higher education now.

152. **In our view, the case for improving the treatment of part-time and mature students is compelling. In equity all students must be treated in the same manner. Any system that does not achieve this will discriminate against groups—in this case part-time and mature students—and this is unacceptable. Nor does it make sense, given the scale of the improvement in education and skills that the Government wants to see by 2020, to deny support to part-time and mature students, who have a crucial part to play in achieving this objective. We recommend that the forthcoming review of fees examine all aspects of support for part-time and mature students, including both the direct financial support to part-time students and the nature of changes required which will enable the sector to develop greater flexibility to meet the needs of part-time students. We further recommend that this assessment set a deadline by which the treatment of, and support for, undergraduate students becomes broadly similar, irrespective of whether students study full-time or part-time.**

153. We note that there are currently schemes in existence or being developed to assist groups into higher education such as those leaving the armed services.[291] **We recommend that the Government review the existing schemes to assist groups into higher education—such as those leaving the armed forces—to establish the lessons that could be applied to assist other groups.**

290 HC 370–iii, Q 416 (Mr Chotai)

291 Ministry of Defence, *The Nation's Commitment: Cross-Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans*, Cm 7424, July 2008, para A.8

4 Teaching and learning

Introduction

154. The question in the e-consultation with students that received most responses—albeit not on a large number of responses—asked what students thought of the quality of teaching at university. Responses varied widely from the complimentary:

> I have to listen to many different kinds of lecturers from very different backgrounds but I find that the vast majority, while not formally trained to teach, are very good at communicating the relevant concepts. In my opinion this is simply because the better someone understands a topic, the more comprehensively and clearly they can explain it to others.

To the critical:

> university lecturers seriously need to take lessons from school teachers on how to teach. They are clever [...] but they are not skilled at conveying the message. They talk to us like we are fellow professionals who understand everything.[292]

155. These two responses identify the two key issues which informed our deliberations: the knowledge of the subject and pedagogic skills of university teachers. The higher education sector is already well aware of these issues and the relationship between them. Professor Burgess, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester and Chair of the HEAR[293] Implementation Group, told us that it would "be hopeless to have a high-quality researcher who did not understand how you could transmit and communicate effectively with first year students, and that is clearly very important, but it is also very important to be taught by someone who is a leader in their particular field."[294]

Contact time

156. There was some criticism that, given the levels of tuition fees, contact time was inadequate. One student commented that the "contact time we have with staff is a problem. Lectures are often informative but there is no one-to-one time. Sometimes I feel like I'm in a sausage factory rather than surrounded by some of the foremost minds in my field. I appreciate that students get in the way of research but the whole point of university is for the lecturers to pass on their knowledge." But others—particularly it appears those studying science and students at Russell Group universities[295]—considered that contact time was satisfactory. One respondent said that "I have a decent chunk of contact time by most people's standards".[296]

292 Ev 170

293 See para 261.

294 Q 281

295 As those responding to the electronic consultation did not have to state which higher education institution they were attending it was not always possible to establish which institution they were attending. In some cases an institution was identified in the text supplied.

296 Ev 170

Relationship between teaching and research

Funding arrangements

157. We canvassed views on the relationship between teaching and research and on the related question of the effects of changes in funding for research on teaching. HEFCE explained that it is responsible for two main streams of funding to higher education institutions: in 2008–09 £4,632 million recurrent grant for teaching and £1,460 million for research.[297] (The latter stream of resources is called the quality-related research or "QR" funding.) In addition, higher education institutions compete for research funding for projects via the research councils. These two elements of research funding—on the one hand, the QR funding distributed by HEFCE and, on the other, the Research Council funding distributed by competitive bid—are known collectively as the "dual support system" for research.

The Research Assessment Exercise

158. The main method for assessing research quality in relation to QR funding is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which forms the basis for the selective distribution of research funds by the UK higher education funding bodies.[298] DIUS considered that the RAE had significantly improved the quality of research over the past 20 years working within the dual support system.[299] It added that the 2008 RAE results would fully inform HEFCE research funding until 2010–11 for all subjects. However, it was the Government's intention (announced in 2006) to replace the RAE with the Research Excellence Framework (REF). **We consider that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) should take into account the whole range of indicators of excellence, including the broader contribution which academics make.**

159. The Government said that HEFCE was now refining the details of the new REF system, in consultation with funding bodies and the higher education sector across the UK.[300] **There is one issue that we should highlight and in responding to this Report we invite the Government to explain how the REF will take it into account. This is the treatment of multi-disciplinary collaborative teams between, and within, higher education institutions. We consider that the REF should ensure that sufficient weight is given to such collaborative teams and the effects of such teams are taken into account to ensure that they are encouraged and developed. This is a matter that our successor committee may wish to examine.**

160. We recognise that universities have a difficult job balancing research and teaching interests and that resources provided for one purpose may be used for the other. It is important, however, that universities keep their teaching and research budgets separate and clearly identified and where one supports the other this is made explicit. **We recommend that the Government require higher education institutions in receipt of**

297 Ev 460, para 18

298 Ev 177, para 34

299 Ev 177, para 35

300 Ev 177, para 36

funds from the taxpayer to have accounting systems in place that provide a clear audit trail of the use to which resources provided for teaching and research are put so that they can be separately and clearly identified.

The research teaching relationship

161. In its memorandum the Russell Group saw the combination of teaching and research excellence as creating an ideal learning environment. It considered that: "Now more than ever, employers want graduates who are entrepreneurial, good at problem-solving, able to handle uncertainty and who can work both independently and within a team. Russell Group universities create the optimum environment for students to develop these crucial skills by providing:

- opportunities to engage in research processes and undertake independent projects;
- access to leading thinkers, world-class experts in their fields as well as cutting-edge researchers;
- high-quality libraries and facilities and a curriculum informed by world-class research; and
- highly motivated and talented peer group to interact with."[301]

162. The 1994 Group took a similar approach. It explained that its members operated in the strong belief that there was a clear connection between excellent and innovative research and the highest quality teaching, which offered their students the opportunity to learn in a research-enriched community. It continued in its memorandum:

> Research Assessment is, and must continue to be, about supporting research excellence, wherever this is found. Excellence is primarily measured by research output, and there must be peer oversight of the assessment process. The [RAE] has enabled the UK to prove its demonstrable excellence in research in all fields of study. We have strongly supported the Government's desire to reform the RAE in order to lighten the burden on Higher Education Institutions but have emphasised that such reform must strengthen, not weaken, our ability to demonstrate the excellence of UK research. The RAE allows reliable comparisons to be made between subject units, institutions, and countries. It is essential that this aspect is preserved in the [REF] if the UK is to retain its position as a world leader in higher education research. There should be a continuing role for higher education institutions and HEFCE in the development and operation of the revised assessment and funding system and the revised assessment system should be based on a commitment from Government that the dual funding system for research will be maintained.[302]

163. In its evidence, Million+ took a different view. It considered that support for teaching had been treated less favourably than support for research. It argued that "fundamental differences between public funding streams for teaching and research" had arisen as a

301 Ev 409, para 21

302 Ev 346, paras 4.1–4.2; see also Qq 14–25.

result of the distribution of QR funding since 2002. This had been compounded by the decision of the then Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP, to ask HEFCE to prioritise excellent research of international significance in the 5 year QR funding period (2004–05 to 2008–09). Million+ pointed out that during the same period teaching funding had had to accommodate continued growth in student numbers, and other strategic developments and that this differential funding had been reflected in subsequent grant allocations. For example, in 2006–07 the HEFCE recurrent grant for teaching rose by 5.3% but was required to fund 23,000 additional students and other initiatives whereas both research funding and capital investment increased by 8%. Similarly in 2007–08 the HEFCE recurrent grant for teaching rose by 4.4% and was required to fund an additional 25,000 students while research funding rose by 6.9%.[303]

164. The 157 Group, whose member colleges provide higher education, told us that "in further education we have a very strong culture around pedagogy".[304] Citing recent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reviews, the Group said that "generally reviews of HE in FE (i.e. delivered by the FE) have come out very well indeed. Because the two things we do really well are that we teach well and deliver learning well, and we support students very well."[305]

165. John Denham considered that it was important that "we recognise excellence wherever it is and that is what the RAE did". He considered that there was a:

> case for having fairly high levels of research concentration. We need to ensure that those people who are working in pockets of excellence in some universities are not isolated, are able to work with research teams in others and be properly recognised for doing so. We need to get the balance there right.[306]

The former Secretary of State also saw the RAE results as providing assistance to applicants considering to which institutions they might apply. He said that the RAE indicated to "you where you have the best concentrations of researchers in particular subjects" and that it "would also point out where you might have world class people doing research in the university round the corner that you had not thought about. The RAE also shows where excellence is."[307]

166. Professor Brown, former Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent, who for many years had chaired a research and teaching forum, explained that "over time research and teaching had grown apart and research had become the more prestigious activity and […] the research assessment exercise has contributed to that."[308] He said that the reform of the RAE provided an opportunity to improve the links. It seemed extraordinary to him that the various impacts that have been considered were "on the economy, on society and on public policy but not student education, yet actually that is the key impact."[309] Professor

303 Ev 313, paras 23–24; see also Q 428 (Professor Driscoll)

304 Q 72

305 Q 72

306 Q 569

307 Q 560

308 Q 428 (Professor Brown)

309 *As above*

Driscoll, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University, said that "we know now that many institutions appoint people simply to do research and cannot afford—because the stakes are so high—to let them do any teaching".[310] He considered that as a result there was a "divide taking place and staff are being appointed on teaching only contracts in Russell Group universities and in the 1994 Group universities".[311] He called for a more equitable distribution of QR funding because the last RAE had "demonstrated that all institutions throughout the sector can produce excellent research, not just within the Russell Group".[312]

167. On the relationship between teaching and research (often described as the "teaching-research nexus"), we adopted a two pronged approach: we asked students what difference it made to their experience of university having teachers who were active in research; and we sought evidence of the relationship between research and teaching from higher education institutions and from the Government.

Views of students

168. The following selection of points made in oral evidence and in the e-consultation illuminates some of the key issues raised by students.

- Coming from UCL which is heavily research-intensive [...] my friends who did science subjects, a lot of the teaching actively engaged them in the research so their final year dissertations were on the research that their lecturer or teacher was doing, so they were actually engaged in discovering new approaches to science and new ideas—new sciences within that. My background is an arts background and, yes, because my lecturers and teachers were the lecturers and researchers who were at the top of their field the information we were given, the things that we were taught were at the cutting edge, they were the brand new, this has just been discovered a week ago, looking at sources in books that had not been published, that sort of thing.[313]

- Some of my best lecturers and academic staff are those who have participated in research. Looking at the divide of just having a teaching-only university essentially, are they just going to have a standard curriculum, is it just going to be an extension of high school? What makes a university experience unique is that a lecturer can stand there and say "I have been undertaking research in this; this is how it relates to the theory"—that is what brings a lecture alive, otherwise lecturers are just reading from textbooks and that is not stimulating, stimulation is the key."[314]

- In my third year now [...] we have lab periods because we do research projects.[315]

- I am amazed by the number of students that are considering further education, PhDs and masters. I think the reason for that is because we have got the world-class

310 Q 428 (Professor Driscoll)

311 *As above*

312 *As above*

313 Q 459 (Mr Steward)

314 HC 370–iii, Q 466 (Mr Chotai)

315 HC 370–i, Q 119 (Mr Nussey)

researchers in our department. Although I think teaching is a very important side of it, research has improved the teaching in the faculty.[316]

- [*From a law student*] I think it's vital that they [are engaged in research.] I think it obviously changes all the time so they constantly need to be updating and constantly need to be researching, and that does happen. I see it happening.[317]
- [I]t depends on the subjects […] I do German and there is very little point in reading […] linguistics and really deep research into the linguistics. All one really needs to learn is how to speak German.[318]
- In my first two years we were taught by PhD students […] we actually talked to our personal tutors and asked if we could get one of the doctorate tutors changed because we thought he was a really bad teacher, but the other two doctorate tutors we have had have been amazing and they have been at the same level of quality as the full-time staff. […] This year we have had one tutor who has been involved in research and this has had a really bad impact on our teaching. It means that he has cancelled lectures because he has had to travel to other universities.[319]
- What I have noticed just anecdotally is a particular lecturer I can think of who is very much engaged in the research, and I have found that quite often they are unable to bring that level of knowledge down to an under-graduate level to enable us to engage with it. They are so focused and I think the majority of their working week is in that research.[320]
- [I]t is important that the people teaching are still engaged in research, so that they can keep students up to date with their topic. However, this should not be at the expense of the teaching itself. Some lecturers do seem to just be teaching so that they can get funding for their research and therefore don't enjoy the teaching aspect, resulting in uninteresting lectures. Also, classes were often cancelled when lecturers were off on research projects, sometimes without students being given much advance notice and with no work set to do whilst they were absent. There needs to be some sort of cover system at least but, where possible, the research should be done in non-contact time.[321]

169. A student from the University of Liverpool, Gemma Jerome, raised a wider point. She argued that:

> in spite of the rhetoric for the benefits of research-led teaching, like attracting world class researchers and facilitating a culture of original enquiry this does not necessarily correlate to a positive student experience. For example, we are proposing to double the tuition fees so should we not be putting more of a focus on these active

316 HC 370–i, Q 154 (Mr Nussey)

317 Q 207 (Ms Donaghy)

318 Q 206 (Mr Williamson)

319 HC 370–i, Qq 147 and 149 (Mr Hodgson)

320 HC 370–i, Q 152 (Ms Jerome)

321 Ev 171 (E-Consultation)

> consumers as we call the students. There needs to be much more focus on teaching.[322] […]
>
> Some departments are potentially being closed at Liverpool because of the perceived disproportionate emphasis on research against teaching, so even if your teaching is strong if your research is not then that is having a negative impact on the student experience.[323]

170. These responses show a range of views. Taking all the comments we received on the relationship between teaching and research[324] they showed us that many students were aware that their teachers were engaged in research. We should add that when we visited the American Council for Education they pointed out that the "National Survey of Student Engagement"[325] showed that student satisfaction was correlated with research. **Most of the students who responded to our inquiry saw the connection between teaching and research as positive, finding the proximity to research stimulating and the quality of teachers' scholarship enhanced. They also identified some negative effects such as cancelled classes and unavailability of lecturers. We conclude that, where research impacts negatively on teaching, the university authorities should be expected to address the deficiencies.**

Evidential link between research and the quality of teaching

171. Despite seeking evidence to establish the relationship between research and teaching regularly during the course of the inquiry[326] it was only towards the end when we put the question to John Denham that we received a detailed response. In a supplementary written memorandum DIUS explained:

> The link between research and teaching has been of increasing interest to researchers over the last 20 years, with the balance of the evidence ebbing and flowing. The evidence is not strong in demonstrating a direct link between research and the quality of teaching. However, studies also note that there are many tangential and ephemeral aspects that impact on teaching that are hard to pin down.
>
> To summarise, early studies generally concluded that there is no necessary relationship between teaching and research. However, studies focusing on student perceptions have shown that students value learning in a research environment. Hattie and Marsh […] conducted a large meta analysis of research studies in this area and concluded that there was no inextricable link between research and teaching, but that purposeful action by universities could bring about that linkage, through actions such as better training for staff in teaching, through curriculum change, and by being

322 HC 370–iii, Q 462 (Ms Jerome)

323 HC 370–iii, Q 470

324 For example, Q 203 ff, HC 370–i, Q 144 ff, HC 370–ii, Q 334 ff.

325 The National Survey of Student Engagement in the US obtains, on an annual basis, information from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities nationwide about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. See www.nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm.

326 For example, Qq 8 ff, Qq 138–39, Qq 280 ff, HC 370–i, Qq 29 ff, Qq 428 ff.

explicit about good teaching at university level being about more than imparting information.[327]

172. **Having examined the material supplied by DIUS we cannot see that convincing evidence is currently available to prove the assertion that good-quality research is essential for good teaching of undergraduates. In our view, the evidence is at best mixed and there may be different relationships between research and teaching not just across disciplines within institutions and even within departments and that across the sector these relationships may range from mutually supportive to antagonistic.** The nature of the relationship is, however, of crucial importance. It highlights a serious and fundamental question about the nature of a "university education", the distribution of excellence and the relative roles of teaching, research and scholarship in supporting student learning, not least in terms of developing students' professional and learning skills. **We recommend that the Government commission and publish independent research in this area to inform future policy decisions.**

173. As the evidence we set out above shows, some institutions are encouraging and developing their students' research skills, and we applaud this development as it will develop their analytical and "employability" skills—see paragraph 202. In our view increased opportunities for undergraduates to engage in research within their programmes of study may lead to a requirement that those teaching such students have at least a basic appreciation and experience of carrying out research, thus leading to a strengthening of "research-informed teaching". **We consider that the extent to which undergraduates across the higher education sector are expected to carry out research as part of their programme of study and the extent to which those teaching and supervising such students need to be actively engaged in research themselves are both matters that should be addressed in the research which we recommend that the Government commissions. The results of this research may require a significant reassessment of where and how resources are allocated between teaching and research.** If the research were to find that good teaching does not need to be underpinned with research, the Government could—as an example—have the opportunity to focus investment in research in science-related subjects in fewer universities.

Impact on the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

174. On the assumption that there is a link between research and teaching there is a dilemma for those allocating QR funding to higher education institutions. Because the purpose of the Government in providing funds for research is to optimise the outcomes of research, and, if it believes that selective funding is needed to achieve this (something on which we do not comment in this Report), then, in our view, it would be a reasonable policy to concentrate funds to achieve the best value for the taxpayer. But simultaneously the Government wants all students to experience the best teaching. It follows from the latter that, if good teaching accompanies research activity, then the resources for research should be spread widely, to enable students in all higher education institutions to benefit from an improvement of teaching. That would not necessarily further the purposes for which the government provides funding for research. One potentially positive step would

327 Ev 533, paras 1–2

be for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to give greater weight to the impact that research has on teaching. **We invite the Government in responding to this Report to comment on the proposition that one of the indicators of excellence to be taken into account by the Research Excellence Framework will be the demonstrable effect that research and teaching have on each other in institutions, and also the broader contribution which academics submitting to the REF make to pedagogic research and by implication pedagogic practice.**

Pedagogical research

175. A second step to easing tension between research and teaching could be achieved with greater emphasis on pedagogy and recognition of research into pedagogy. The Institute of Physics wished to see "at least one member of staff specialising in teaching innovation", which, it pointed out, was common practice in American state universities.[328] The Institute said that a more practical solution would be to encourage a community of such academics which could cater for a range of universities and that having "someone active in pedagogy research available to a physics department would ensure contact with people active in frontline physics research". It added that a way to pay for these academics would need to be determined.[329]

176. The Staff and Educational Development Association submitted that research into pedagogy had been "belittled and that committed subject teachers have found it impossible to develop an equivalence either in their generic or discipline-based pedagogic research to their discipline-based research."[330] In its view, much of the financing of innovation had been less efficient than it could have been because of the absence of a scholarly pedagogic culture able to incorporate project outputs in a systematic and managed way. The Association explained that in many universities the current analysis was that the core teaching processes were "working well, the prestige of the institution is high, and innovation is an enhancement activity rather than the core of essential reform" and that in these places the claim was made that modest incremental improvement would be sufficient to guarantee high quality. The Association's view was that a "more critical approach" was required, and that "funding both to devise and then embed innovation is a necessary part of a bigger package of simultaneous developments".[331] **We recommend that the Research Excellence Framework explicitly recognises and gives credence to research into pedagogy and the teaching within, and across, disciplines.** In other words, a chemistry lecturer who researches teaching in chemistry must have a category in which such activity can be recorded and recognised with new "expert pedagogic research" panels established, if necessary, and able to do that job.

328 Ev 231, para 12

329 *As above*

330 Ev 268, para 4.2

331 Ev 268, para 4.3

Promotions made on the basis of teaching expertise

177. We asked a number of academics and Vice-Chancellors whether assessment for promotion took account of expertise in areas other than research, in particular teaching. Professor Norton, an academic at Liverpool Hope University, responded that:

> in our own university […] it is clearly written into our promotions criteria that we would expect that, over and above being a really good lecturer, to be promoted from lecturer to senior lecturer to principal lecturer. I can see that rewarding staff for teaching as well as for research is something that is happening, perhaps not as quickly as we would want it to happen but it is happening. I think there is student pressure for it to happen even more, so I think there are external drivers.[332]

Professor Saunders from the University of Liverpool said that on "our scoring system, research and teaching are weighted equally and then there is 'other', which includes administration and outreach".[333] Similarly, Professor Arthur said that:

> I can speak for the University of Leeds. We are currently in the process of redesigning all of our promotions criteria to give an equal weight to learning and teaching, enterprise and knowledge transfer, and research. We are in the final throes of how you do that at professorial level; we have already done and agreed it with the UCU for all of the other grades.[334]

178. On the basis of the replies we obtained during our inquiry it appears that higher education institutions are attaching increasing weight to teaching skills when considering academics' appointments and promotions, although it appears that the degree to which teaching counts varies across institutions as well as in relation to promotion level (that is, it may be easier to become a "teaching-led senior lecturer" than a "teaching-led professor"). We welcome the increased weighting being given to teaching as it enhances the importance and value of this crucial aspect of university work, not least for students. In our view, greater clarity across the sector on the weight attached to teaching in assessments for promotion would, in combination with a focus on a heightened professionalism, enhance the status of teaching within the sector. **We consider that the higher education sector needs to be clearer about the circumstances in which promotion and progression can be achieved on the basis of pedagogical skills, scholarship and expertise. We recommend that the Government require higher education institutions in receipt of public funds to ensure that they have put in place clear and effective criteria for appointments and promotions based on teaching.**

Higher Education Academy

179. The Higher Education Academy was formed in 2004 and brought together the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, the Learning and Teaching Support Network and the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund's National Co-ordination Team, with the aim of creating a single, central body to support the enhancement of

332 HC 370–i, Q 71

333 HC 370–i, Q38

334 Q 435

learning and teaching in higher education. The Academy is "owned" by its members, Universities UK and GuildHE, and receives the majority of its funding from the four UK higher education funding bodies, with further income derived from subscriptions by higher education institutions.[335] (According to HEFCE's accounts, it provided £21.9 million to the Academy in 2007–08.)[336] The Academy's "mission" is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students.[337] The Academy's strategic aims are to:

a) identify, develop and disseminate evidence-informed approaches;

b) broker and encourage the sharing of effective practice;

c) support universities and colleges in bringing about strategic change;

d) inform, influence and interpret policy; and

e) raise the status of teaching.[338]

180. We asked the Academy what difference it had made as result of the support it had received from the taxpayer. Professor Ramsden, Chief Executive of the Academy, considered that there had "been an improvement in [the] standard of teaching in higher education over the last five to ten years […] The extent to which the Academy can say it has achieved that and encouraged that, I think is a difficult question to answer".[339] We found this answer disappointing for two reasons. **First, if the Higher Education Academy is operating effectively and meeting its strategic aims, we consider that, working with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, it should be able to play a key role in promoting and enhancing academic standards and in driving forward the changes we suggest are needed in this Report. If, however, the Academy is not working effectively we conclude that it will not be able to play its full part in promoting and enhancing academic standards in higher education.**

181. Second, Professor Ramsden's evidence raises a question about the value for money that the taxpayer is obtaining for the substantial amount of subsidy paid to the Academy. We note that the final report on the interim evaluation of the Academy published in January 2008 found that:

> the Academy is not yet realising its full potential. Particular issues, both strategic and operational in nature, need to be addressed as a matter of priority. These issues are significant but surmountable, and throughout this report we set out proposals for their resolution.[340]

335 Oakleigh Consulting Ltd, *Interim Evaluation of the Higher Education Academy: A report to HEFCE, HEFCW, SFC, DELNI, GuildHE and UUK*, January 2008, para 1.2

336 HEFCE, *Annual: report and accounts 2007–08*, HC (2007–08) 498, May 2008, p 78

337 Oakleigh Consulting Ltd, *Interim Evaluation of the Higher Education Academy: A report to HEFCE, HEFCW, SFC, DELNI, GuildHE and UUK*, January 2008, para 1.2

338 Higher Education Academy, *The Higher Education Academy Strategic Plan 2008–13*, July 2008, p 1; Ev 305, para 1.2; Ev 493

339 Q 373

340 "Interim Evaluation of the Higher Education Academy", A report to HEFCE, HEFCW, SFC, DELNI, GuildHE and UUK by Oakleigh Consulting Ltd, January 2008, para 1.3

We remain concerned that the Academy could not demonstrate what value it added for the money supplied by the taxpayer or show that it was providing good value for money. **We recommend that HEFCE carry out a further evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of the Higher Education Academy by the end of the year and publish the evaluation. The operation and effectiveness of the Academy is an issue that our successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education may wish to examine.**

182. On student engagement, we noted from the Academy's written evidence that in "the four and a half years we have been working we have found institutions keen to work with us to enhance the quality of students' experiences"[341] and that while "universities and colleges are taking increasing notice of the 'student voice', and the Government has programmes such as the National Student Forum, the experience of the Higher Education Academy is that there is some way to go."[342] When Professor Ramsden gave oral evidence we were concerned about the extent to which the Academy involved students currently studying in institutions in its work,[343] though we took some comfort from his acknowledgment that the Academy needed to "engage more with students through not only the higher education academics but also institutions to do that because they have a very, very big part to play in enhancing quality and I think we need to use that resource".[344] After the oral evidence session the Academy supplied a supplementary memorandum.[345] The Academy was confident that it had made a positive difference to the quality of the student experience in UK higher education and cited the Professional Standards Framework, which it had introduced,[346] though it said that there had been no systematic review of the extent to which higher education institutions were using it to support the development of teaching.[347] The Academy also explained in detail—and with examples—that it involved students in its work at all levels—from membership of its Board, to strategic partnerships with the NUS, to work with individual students in its subject centres.

183. We are grateful to the Academy for supplying the additional information. It has not, however, removed our concerns completely. Despite it seeing its role as focused on enhancing the student experience, the Academy appears to have no means of systematically accessing directly the views and experiences of students. **We recommend that, whilst taking account of the work of the National Student Forum, as a condition of continued support the Government require the Higher Education Academy to establish its own student forum for the purpose of accessing directly the views and experiences of students, particularly in relation to its own areas of focus. In addition, we recommend that the Government review the operation and use by higher education institutions of the Academy's Professional Standards Framework and we recommend that the**

341 Ev 305, para 1.3

342 Ev 309, para 5.1

343 Qq 375–77

344 Q 377

345 Ev 492

346 Ev 493; see also Ev 307, para 3.5

347 Ev 307, para 3.6

Government require the Academy to produce "steering" statements in relation to academic staff development as a means for improving the student experience.

184. Finally, regarding our recommendation—at paragraph 186—that all staff, including current staff in higher education who teach, should be required to have training and encouraged to obtain a higher education teaching qualification, we see a role for the Academy to encourage established staff to engage in professional development in relation to their teaching responsibilities and to set up systems to record their development. **We recommend that the Government require the Higher Education Academy as a condition for continued support through HEFCE to develop arrangements to encourage established academic staff to engage in professional development in relation to their teaching responsibilities and to set up systems to record their development. In return for this support from the taxpayer through the Academy we expect higher education institutions to press their staff to continue their professional development.**

Teaching qualification and training

185. We examined the question of teaching skills (or pedagogy) and the need for a teaching qualification. The Heads of Education and Development Group pointed out that the "widespread introduction of pedagogical development programmes for staff new to teaching in Higher Education has been successful as proven, for instance, in improving student satisfaction scores across the sector."[348] Currently, however, higher education institutions differ in the way they "induct" and "train" new lecturing staff: practices range from some which do not have any compulsory provision to others which require that all new staff undertake a mandatory programme up to Postgraduate Certificate in Education in Higher Education (PGCE HE) level. The Higher Education Academy told us that higher education institutions took different approaches to accreditation. The Academy had information about the programmes that it accredited: it had 285 accredited programmes from 134 higher education institutions, not all of these programmes were PG Certificate in Higher Education but included continuing professional development (CPD) schemes and modules that enabled staff to meet the criteria in the Professional Standards Framework. The Academy did not accredit any further education college programmes, but it told us that many colleges offered provision that was validated by higher education institutions. On the question of how many higher education institutions required staff to have a PGCE, the Academy's experience was that this was a requirement for the vast majority, but detailed figures were not available.[349] The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit Roehampton University said that:

348 Ev 291

349 In e-mails dated 3 and 13 July 2009, in response to a question about the number of institutions that have PGCE higher education programmes and require all staff to have a PGCE, the Higher Education Academy explained to the Committee: "Institutions take different approaches to accredited provision. The Academy only has information about the programmes that we accredit (which is only part of what is available to the sector). We currently have 285 accredited programmes from 134 higher education institutions. Not all of these programmes are PG Cert in Higher Education as we also accredit CPD schemes and modules that enable staff to meet the criteria in the Professional Standards Framework.

"We do not ourselves accredit any FE college programmes, but many colleges offer provision that is validated by HEIs and that can lead successful participants to gain Associate status of the Academy.

> Pedagogic development programmes for new academic staff are in place here and elsewhere, many aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework but often they are not compulsory and not entirely valued by the institution. Ironically new staff often don't attend because they are too busy teaching and thus teach with no training, no awareness of the scholarship and research in this area. They research as professionals and teach as amateurs.[350]

In a supplementary memorandum, the Staff and Educational Development Association told us that it was "so important for the quality of student learning that, as soon as possible, all staff who teach should be expected to achieve Standard Two of the National Professional Standards Framework".[351] When we asked a group of mid-career academics whether every lecturer should be trained to teach they all replied that they should.[352]

186. We see force in the Association's views and we consider that current teaching staff and graduate students who teach and carry out pedagogical functions should have adequate training. As one respondent to the e-consultation pointed out when commenting on inadequate teaching: "the worst offenders are the PhD students […] who are employed to run lab sessions (in which they refuse to help), mark coursework (which is always carried out suspiciously quickly and inconsistently) and give lacklustre tutorial sessions (these involve a couple of half-baked PowerPoint slides and quickly deteriorate into having a chat)."[353] **We conclude that all staff—new entrants, current staff and graduate students—in higher education who teach should be encouraged to obtain a higher education teaching qualification, which, depending on an individual's role and level of experience, should be achieved through initial training or on the basis of continuing professional development.** (To assist staff, particularly those established in post, to develop their teaching skills we envisage that the Higher Education Academy should develop its current arrangements to provide assistance—see paragraph 184.) **We also recommend that the Government, in consultation with the higher education sector, including student representatives, review the use of graduate students in teaching roles and examine whether additional means of support—such as the development of mentoring arrangements and contracts of appointment—are required.**

187. There appears to us to be a wide range of professional pedagogical courses and support available from, for example, the Higher Education Academy, which, as we note above, have been developed with considerable support from the taxpayer. **We recommend that the Government in consultation with the higher education sector, including student representatives, draw-up and agree a strategy to require all university staff engaged in regular and significant teaching to undertake appropriate training in pedagogical skills and also to encourage staff across higher education institutions in England to obtain a professional teaching qualification. We further recommend that the Government require higher education institutions as a condition of support from**

"On the question of how many HEIs require staff to have a PGCE, we are not sure that anyone would collect this information centrally. Our experience is that this is a requirement in the vast majority, but the Academy does not collect the hard figures that would back this up."

350 Ev 249

351 Ev 526

352 Q 495

353 Ev 170

the taxpayer to have in place programmes to enhance the teaching effectiveness of all academic staff who have teaching responsibilities. We recommend that, within its review processes, the QAA monitor and report on the extent to which institutions are demonstrably meeting this requirement.

Dealing with poor teachers

188. Respondents to the e-consultation made the point that there appeared to be no mechanism for dealing with poor teachers in universities, unlike schools, and that deans of faculties appeared unresponsive and were often not accountable to students for inadequate teaching.[354] As one respondent put it:

> In a lot of lectures, the entire year group are made to feel like an inconvenience. Complaints go unheard, student reps seem to be ignored even when the same complaints arise, and the bog-standard answer to most requests for help seems to be "You should know it already, so I won't tell you." Yes, there are times when the asker should certainly be at a standard in year 3 where they shouldn't have to ask for help with year 1 or 2 principles, but if 10/20 students on a course of 80 (down from 130 in year 1) are all asking the same things, shouldn't this set off alarm bells as to why so many students are struggling? Apparently not.[355]

189. We asked Professor Ramsden of the Higher Education Academy how the sector dealt with the brilliant researcher who was a hopeless teacher. He replied:

> it matters very much because that researcher […] went into academia not just to do research but also to share his knowledge, his experience and his inspiration with other people. I believe that is a very important part of what all academics should do. It is obviously up to universities to encourage that. My view is—and it is anecdotal evidence—that they do encourage it, but we encourage it from the Higher Education Academy's point of view by working with the higher education sector to develop a national professional standards framework for teaching which all academics are expected—and it is self-regulating—to rise up to.[356]

190. The encouragement of lecturers to obtain a higher education teaching qualification could be part of the answer to poor teaching. It cannot be the only solution. For sustained improvement to be made, higher education institutions across the sector need to respond actively to the concerns of students about poor teaching—after all, students are in an excellent position to judge the quality of teaching—and identify the remedial action required and ensure that, with support, it is carried through and improvements made. We note press reports that the students' union at one university recently set up a "Late" hotline after repeated complaints about cancelled lectures and students sitting around waiting for their teachers.[357] We have not examined the operation of this facility but, in our view, it shows that the views of students on the quality of teaching can, and should, be channelled

354 Ev 170

355 Ev 170–71

356 Q 371

357 "Students 'spying' on lecturers who turn up late", *The Times*, 30 April 2009

to university authorities. **We conclude that the Government and the higher education sector, in consultation with student representatives, should draw up and implement arrangements applicable across the sector which allow students to convey concerns about poor teaching and which ensure that universities take effective remedial action. We consider that such arrangements once established should be subject to review by the Quality Assurance Agency to ensure that they allow students to convey concerns and that remedial action is taken, where warranted.**

191. We discuss in the next chapter the question of standards and quality, including at paragraphs 225 and 226 the role of the Quality Assurance Agency in reviewing the quality of teaching.

Scholarship

192. Professor Trainor, President of Universities UK, defined scholarship as “information about a discipline at the highest level of available knowledge”.[358] In our view, it goes without question that those who teach in higher education need to maintain an active and up-to-date scholarship of the whole area on which they teach. This is especially important where an academic’s specialist research is narrowly focussed but the same individual is expected to teach across a broad subject area. The issue for us was what arrangements should be in place to safeguard scholarship and research.

193. The Higher Education Academy pointed out that it has supported higher education institutions by promoting “the professionalisation of and excellence in teaching through a number of means”, including the UK Professional Standards Framework, which “requires academics to demonstrate the incorporation of scholarship, research and professional practice into their teaching activity”.[359] **We consider that all academic staff in higher education engaged in regular and significant teaching should be able to demonstrate the incorporation of up-to-date scholarship, research and professional practice into their teaching.**

Quality of feedback given by teachers to students

194. The views of students responding to the e-consultation on the quality of feedback varied. For example, one student said that feedback was “usually prompt and detailed, explaining the good and bad parts of your work and how it could be improved.” This was not, however, the majority view. Criticism included one student who said that feedback and consistency of marking were “awful” while another said that the “feedback I have been given ranges from no comments to well done to ‘don’t use bullet points’”. The respondent believed that this provided “insufficient feedback to learn how to improve my work. Each lecturer should have to put one good point about the work that should be continued for future work, and one bad point that needs to be improved on. This way, students can learn what they are doing right and the improvements needed.”[360]

358 Q 10

359 Ev 307, paras 3.2–3.3

360 Ev 171; see also Ev 159 (Informal meeting with students at Imperial College London).

195. The oral evidence from students showed a similar pattern. In a typical comment, Jun Rentschler, a student, told us:

> I have to say that I am quite dissatisfied with the feedback. […I]n the first year I submitted some work and I got [a good mark], say it was 72 per cent. The lecturer told me it is a good piece of work so I said "There is one-third missing, where is it?" and she said "You cannot score better than 80 in the first place" and I said "All right, what is missing then?" She said it was just the general impression or something like that […] I did not know what I did wrong, I did not know how to improve my work, and that has been similar throughout the last two years.[361]

A student at the same evidence session, Sally Tye, gave a contrasting perspective:

> I have had a very different experience. On every single piece of work […] we get the cover sheet marked with all the different requirements and what mark we have got with comments at the bottom. Usually on an essay we have to go for a tutorial to pick up our work and they go through it with us as to what we need to do. If we have done a presentation then usually at the end of the presentation we get feedback on exactly what we have done wrong and why we have got the mark we have got.[362]

Wes Streeting, President of the NUS, also identified feedback as "often seen as a source of concern" for students. He knew from NUS research that "25 per cent of students cited they do receive verbal feedback on their assessment, but 71 per cent actually want it".[363]

196. We note that the QAA produced a code of practice on the assessment of students, which stated that it "is good practice to provide students with sufficient, constructive and timely feedback on their work in respect of all types of assessment".[364] We are therefore surprised that feedback on students' work is an issue of such concern and that the sector as a whole (rather than at the level of individual institutions) has not to date been more successful in addressing the matter. **Whilst individual institutions may have developed effective institutional or course-based guidance, we conclude that there is a need for a code of practice across the higher education sector, which builds on the QAA's "Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 6: Assessment of students". It is our view that, whether at the level of module, course, department or institution, students should be provided with more personalised information about the intended parameters of their own assessment experience. It is unacceptable and disheartening for any piece of work whether good, average or poor to be returned to a student with only a percentage mark and no comments or with feedback but after such a long time that the feedback is ineffective. We recommend that the Government require the Higher Education Academy to draw up, in consultation with the higher education sector, including representative students, a code of practice on (i) the timing, (ii) the quantity, and (iii) the format and content of feedback and**

361 HC 370–ii, Q 326

362 HC 370–ii, Q 327

363 Q 123

364 QAA, "*Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 6: Assessment of students*", September 2006, p 20

require higher education institutions to demonstrate how they are following the Code when providing feedback to students in receipt of support from the taxpayer.

5 Standards and quality

Introduction

197. *Standards* and *quality* in relation to higher education tend to be well used but often elusive and misunderstood terms. We have defined *academic standards* as predetermined and explicit levels of achievement which must be reached for a student to be granted a qualification. We have used *academic quality* as a way of describing the effectiveness of everything that is done or provided ("the learning opportunities") by individual institutions, to ensure that the students have the best possible opportunity to meet the stated outcomes of their programmes and the academic standards of the awards they are seeking.[365]

Standards

198. The question of standards ran through much of the written and oral evidence we received. There were two key issues:

- have standards required to achieve a particular class of degree fallen over the past 20 years; and
- whether the current arrangements for measuring and safeguarding standards are adequate, in both individual institutions and across the sector as a whole.

To our surprise, though the debate about standards could be fierce, much of the evidence was partial and incomplete, even anecdotal.

199. Our consideration of standards focussed on whether standards for first degrees had remained equivalent over time, and also whether outcomes of degree programmes from different universities were equivalent. In this context, we also considered the question of degree classification, both whether the current arrangements should be replaced and also, again, whether the classifications awarded in different universities were equivalent.

200. Universities UK explained to us that universities themselves "have the responsibility for maintaining the standards of their awards and the quality of the learning opportunities which support students to achieve against those standards".[366] Universities UK added that universities work "hard, both collectively and individually, to fulfil those responsibilities"[367] and that all "universities have systems in place to ensure that new courses meet the right standards, and that courses are regularly reviewed, by looking at evidence from students, graduates, employers and external examiners".[368]

365 These definitions draw on definitions given in a talk by Peter Williams, Chief Executive of the QAA, and "The Evolution of Institutional Audit in England" posted on the Internet at www.hrk.de/de/download/dateien/QA_in_England.pdf.

366 Ev 438, para 17

367 *As above*

368 Ev 438, para 18

201. When pressed on standards, Universities UK told us that universities had a "really strong stake in maintaining our standards, our good processes, and our reputation for having them". It stated that what mattered "to a significant degree" was "in terms of our ability to retain interest from students applying from around the world, but it is also a crucial bit of our responsibility to our home students.[369] Professor Arthur, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University, echoed this point in oral evidence: "there is no wholesale problem with the standards in British Higher Education […b]ecause we have an internationally successful highly competitive higher education system that is the envy of the world that other people are copying and multiple international students wish to come here."[370] We have not examined the position of international students but we are uneasy about the conclusion that part of the sector appears to draw from the attraction of English universities to international students as evidence that standards are being maintained and are largely unproblematic. While we consider it likely that standards and quality are part of the attraction of the higher education sector in England to international students, other factors, such as the vigorous marketing undertaken by universities, and the fact that England is an Anglophone country, together with the relative current weakness of sterling, may also have an effect. **We conclude that it is simplistic and unsatisfactory for higher education institutions to be seen to rely on the fact that international students continue to apply as evidence that standards are being maintained. It is absurd and disreputable to justify academic standards with a market mechanism.**

Views of employers

202. We begin this chapter with the views of employers on standards and quality. The employers' representatives, from whom we took oral evidence, were complimentary about the higher education sector, though some of those who gave written evidence had concerns—for example, the Institution of Engineering and Technology said that "a sizeable proportion of today's students appear to have problems of poor motivation and a less than ideal approach to learning".[371] But Mike Harris from the Institute of Directors (IoD) said that his members were "genuinely upbeat about the quality of education delivered by universities".[372] Where those who gave oral evidence did, however, perceive problems was "right throughout the education system, beginning in schools and also in further education colleges, so that when you get your ultimate employee there are particular skills weaknesses".[373] Mr Harris explained that his members were looking for "employability" in graduates.[374] He defined this as a:

> mixture of basic skills, personal qualities, good attitude, genuine employment skills, meeting deadlines, being reliable, and personal qualities. That really means, aside from the technical skills and the academic knowledge […] it is getting on with people, it is being flexible and it is being reliable. That is what we have found to be

369 Q 40

370 Qq 412 (Professor Arthur), 413

371 Ev 283, para 15

372 HC 370–iii, Q 369

373 *As above*

374 HC 370–iii, Q 387

> valued above all other things when our members are recruiting graduates. It is that emphasis on employability and fitting into the workplace. The technical skills and the technical knowledge acquired through a degree have a much lower profile when they are recruiting. In terms of the message for what to do, I would focus on work experience, getting greater exposure to the workplace, even bringing your professional skills to bear in a work setting. That is what employers are using to distinguish between some very able candidates.[375]

203. We have not in this inquiry examined the effectiveness of the curriculum on offer in higher education over the longer term. For the most part the students who gave evidence were, by our invitation, undergraduates currently at university with no previous experience of higher education, although a few mature students had previously taken degrees. While employers were broadly content with the operation of the system for the immediate future this may not hold for the longer term. **The question of whether higher education offers graduates a suitable preparation both lifelong and lifewide in a changing world (see paragraph 7) is another matter, which our successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education may wish to examine.**

Comparability: views of students

204. The views of students contrasted with those of employers. Their prevalent view[376] was that the current degree classification did not provide a satisfactory method of measuring the work done or a satisfactory basis for comparing degrees between universities, and even between subjects at the same university. Sally Tye, a student, drew attention to the contrast between school where "you are measured against your peer group [where] A-levels are across the board" and said that "it seems strange that universities are on a different measurement and I think for your own personal sense of how well you are doing."[377] Victoria Edwards, a mature student, made the point that many with family responsibilities did not have the option of applying to a prestigious university:

> anybody in my situation, if they are living in Newcastle or Stockport or wherever it is, and they have got their family there and children in schools there, you do not have a choice about which university you apply to, so you need to know that your 2:1 from that university is going to be exactly the same as far as employers are concerned. There are lots of reasons why people choose their university and sometimes you do not have a choice. If I had not got a place at Oxford Brookes I would not have gone on the course because there is nowhere else I could have commuted to.[378]

For several there were concerns that employers had preconceptions that favoured degrees from certain universities. Ricky Chotai, studying business management at Salford, explained that his "degree isn't just as worthy as a business management degree from the

375 HC 370–iii, Q 387

376 Ev 171, para 6; see also Ev 159 (Informal meeting with students at Imperial College London) and Ev 164–65 (Informal meeting with University of Oxford students), Qq 252–53.

377 HC 370–ii, Q 352

378 HC 370–ii, Q 354

University of Manchester. Employers […] immediately pick up on that and if I managed to get a first class [or] 2:1 against one of those students I think my application would be further down the list."[379]

205. In the e-consultation several students commented on whether an upper second honours degree in two different subjects within the same university could be of different value. One pointed out that it was possible to have a well respected department within a poorly performing university and that in media coverage of the league tables caveats were rarely added that certain departments were outstanding. Another took a different view: "based on Cambridge, [honours] degrees classes was roughly equivalent within an institution. The range of marks varied between subjects, but the proportion of students getting a 2:i wasn't […] hugely different. Given that the entry criteria were also broadly similar for each course, the degrees are probably roughly equivalent in value".[380] We examine comparability of standards at paragraph 250 and following.

Quality Assurance Agency

206. The cornerstone of what is in effect a system of self-regulation by individual institutions is the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA, established in 1997, is a charity and a company limited by guarantee, governed by a Board and managed by an Executive Committee. It is funded through subscriptions from higher education institutions and through contracts with the major funding councils, to whom it reports annually on its activities.[381] The QAA employs 125 members of staff and uses over 550 reviewers to undertake audits (drawn predominantly from working academic practitioners in higher education institutions). It has an annual turnover of £11 million.[382]

207. Universities UK explained that the QAA conducted regular visits to universities to scrutinise quality and that QAA reports were publicly available and included judgements about the confidence that could be placed in universities' management of quality and standards.[383] But the QAA is not the higher education equivalent of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), which inspects education for those under 19 and the further education sector.[384] The QAA's purpose, in its own words, is "to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to

379 Q 198

380 Ev 171

381 QAA, *Self Evaluation: External Review for Confirmation of Full Membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)*, February 2008, and QAA's website provide the following information. The Board of QAA has 15 members: four are appointed by the representative bodies of the heads of higher education institutions; four are appointed by the funding bodies in higher education in the UK; six are independent directors who have wide experience of industry, commerce, finance or the practice of a profession, and are appointed by the Board as a whole; and one is a student, also appointed by the Board as a whole.

382 QAA, *An Introduction to the QAA*, 2009

383 Ev 438, para 18

384 The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is a non-ministerial government department created on 1st April 2007. The Education & Inspections Act 2006 established the new Department as the single inspectorate in England for children, young people and adult learners, bringing together functions from the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) of HM Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), and the Office for Standards in Education (the former Ofsted). (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills Resource Accounts 2007–08, HC (2007–08) 582)

inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education".[385] The QAA pointed out in its written evidence to the Committee that:

> The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality rests with individual institutions. QAA reviews and reports on how well they meet those responsibilities, identifies good practice and makes recommendations for improvement.
>
> We visit institutions to conduct our audits, make judgements and publish reports, but we are not an inspectorate or a regulator and do not have statutory powers. We aim to ensure that institutions have effective processes in place to secure their academic standards, but we do not judge the standards themselves.[386]

One main aspect of the QAA's work is institutional reviews, which are reviews and audits of the academic performance of institutions. We noted that the QAA used to carry out reviews of individual subjects but that it has discontinued this process.

208. We agree with the QAA that it is in the public interest that there are sound standards of higher education qualifications. **The public purse supports higher education to the tune of £15 billion and it is essential those studying at higher education institutions are awarded degrees that measure accurately and consistently the intellectual development and skills that students have achieved. We consider that it is essential that a body concerns itself with assuring the comparability of standards both between institutions and over time.**

The operation of the Quality Assurance Agency

209. The heads of higher education institutions that had been subject to QAA audits stressed the strength of the QAA's processes. Professor Trainor, President of Universities UK and Principal of King's College London, said that any institution coming up to a periodic institutional audit by the QAA—and his was then preparing for one in January 2009—did "not think that the QAA lacks teeth".[387] He saw the QAA as "having a great deal of independence" and a body that was "above any ability of an individual institution to influence what is going on".[388] He saw the QAA in combination with each higher education institution as policing "standards and processes in UK higher education".[389] Representatives from the higher education sector also made the point that the current arrangements as well as safeguarding standards also led to improvement. Professor Driscoll, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University, had been subject to a recent institutional audit by the QAA and said that "enhancement was very much part of their review".[390] We are not surprised that those from institutions that the QAA has on whole found to be working well have commended the QAA.

385 QAA, *Annual review 2006–07*, 2008, p 16

386 Ev 237, paras 1.2–1.3

387 Q 40; see also Qq 102, 105 and 107.

388 Q 40

389 *As above*

390 Q 412 (Professor Driscoll)

210. The operation of the QAA, however, also came in for criticism. Professor Geoffrey Alderman considered that:

> the QAA […] should be refocused to concentrate squarely on standards. At the moment it concentrates on process. It is possible to come out of the QAA with a glowing report but in fact have poor standards.[391]

Others submitting written evidence echoed Professor Alderman's criticism:

> HEFCE/QAA etc. concern themselves merely with the written documentation of the courses[…] Each department or faculty assesses the "quality" of its own course, but this assessment is usually merely an examination of the course documentation. There is no genuine external scrutiny. This self-regulation is remarkably similar to that performed by the Financial Services Authority, and we are all now aware of the ineffectiveness of this type of "regulation".[392]

> [T]he QAA thinks in terms of "course delivery" and "course providers" rather than disciplines and teachers. Its notion of how to square academic freedom with quality assurance is to avoid making any judgment about the content of courses—which allows Oxford to teach theology and Westminster complementary medicine—but to insist on a particular form of bureaucratic packaging; this means that a higher value is put on it being absolutely clear and predictable what a student will be told than is put on waking up their minds and seeing how far they can go if they are stretched.[393]

In oral evidence Dr Fenton, an academic, said that in her experience the QAA was "another bureaucratic, administrative burden that you learn to play the game of" and that "You do it very well, you show the processes are there, but it does not actually command the respect of the academics delivering the teaching on the ground".[394]

211. A number of those submitting written evidence made the point that before the 1992 reorganisation of higher education, there had been a body, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA),[395] which was "a version of Ofqual for universities".[396] Professor Ryan, an academic, explained:

> The non-old-fashioned sector gave CNAA-validated degrees and nobody in the CNAA believed that there was anything very clever to be said about whether a CNAA degree in history was more or less demanding than a CNAA degree in sociology or whatever. What was true was that you could not put on a degree course without getting it past the CNAA, it did look at the syllabuses, it looked at your teaching resources and the external examiners came from the CNAA and what they had going for them was they would have been deeply humiliated to validate and

391 Q 317

392 Ev 187, (Mr Royle) para 3.5

393 Ev 186 (Professor Ryan)

394 Q 470

395 Ev 185 (Professor Ryan) and Ev 381 (Staffordshire University), para 3.1

396 HC 370–ii, Q 258; Ofqual is the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator and is regulator of qualifications, examinations and tests in England; it does not cover the higher education sector.

> approve of courses that other people later thought were not up to scratch. It is not so to speak, therefore, an impossible state of affairs; to my mind the CNAA was much more like the right animal than the QAA.[397]

212. We put the criticisms about the focus on process to Peter Williams, Chief Executive of the QAA, who replied that process and outcomes were "very strongly linked".[398] He pointed out that "because teachers plan their teaching, then students will learn. Because students are guided in their learning, they will learn. It is that careful, systematic approach which is important and it is even more important given the size of the system."[399] Following media coverage and with our encouragement, Mr Williams explained that the QAA had carried out an analysis of the critical media stories relating to standards in the last year and he was "coming to the conclusion that there are some areas where there is probably something which requires more systematic investigation than we have been able to give it so far".[400] He added that as the cases investigated under the "causes for concern" process were concerned, the QAA had found the vast majority were in the first instance either personal complaints or grievances or, in the case of staff, post-dismissal or cases where they had been to an employment tribunal; in other words they were personal cases. He considered, however, that it was "also fair to say that it is sometimes quite difficult to discover whether the personal case is masking a systemic problem or is just a one-off administrative failure" and that was

> where we are needing to do more work on individual cases, some of which remain open because we are not satisfied that this thing is simply a personal grievance and we want to come back and look at them, but we cannot do that while the cases are open.[401]

213. Under the arrangements operated by the QAA, "a cause for concern" is defined as "any policy, procedure or action implemented, or omitted, by a higher or further education institution in England, which appears likely to jeopardise the institution's capacity to assure the academic standards and quality of any of its HE programmes and/or awards".[402] The power to declare a possible cause for concern is limited to a group of named organisations, principally statutory, regulatory, and some professional bodies.[403] Any response by the QAA to a request from one of those organisations to investigate an apparent difficulty is "phased and proportionate", beginning with an informal enquiry and only progressing to a

397 HC 370–ii, Q 258

398 Q 342

399 *As above*

400 Q 343

401 *As above*

402 QAA, *Procedure for identifying and handling causes for concern in English institutions offering higher education programmes or awards*, Procedure for adoption from 1 March 2007.

403 DIUS, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Department of Health, Ofsted, Training and Development Agency, National Union of Students, The National Postgraduate Committee, Architects Registration Board, Royal Institute of British Architects, Engineering Council UK, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, The Law Society, The Bar Council, Health Professions Council, General Medical Council, General Dental Council, General Optical Council, General Social Care Council, General Chiropractic Council, General Osteopathic Council, Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, Nursing and Midwifery Council, The British Psychological Society, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, The Association of International Accountants, The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales

full investigation where this is considered to be necessary in the light of evidence gathered.[404]

214. Following Mr Williams' oral evidence, the QAA supplied a supplementary memorandum[405] providing additional information. It pointed out that:

> Since 2002 we have interviewed more than 10,000 students and a similar number of staff in [higher education institutions], to discover whether their institutions' views of themselves and the way they assure their own standards stand up to scrutiny. This contrasts markedly with the handful of individual complainants who have written to us since last summer and with the equally small number who have responded to your Committee's invitation to make submissions. Every audit has led to both commendations for good practice and recommendations for action, categorised as being either 'essential', 'advisable', or 'desirable', and these are almost invariably accepted and acted upon.[406]

In supporting material provided "by way of illustration of our effectiveness" the QAA described "the specific responses and actions from those institutions that received judgements of 'no confidence' and 'limited confidence' in their institutional audits between 2003 and 2007."[407]

215. In April 2009 the QAA published its final report on its "thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education".[408] The report comprised a commentary on the five areas of interest identified from articles and comments made in the media over the summer of 2008:

- student workload and contact hours;
- language requirements for the acceptance of international students;
- recruitment and admission practices for international students;
- use of external examiners; and
- assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards.[409]

216. We have noted the QAA's recommendations on each of these five areas. This Report is not the vehicle to examine them in detail but we consider that they are useful—for example, on student workload and contact hours that "provision by institutions of readily available and clear information about the nature and amount of contact students may

404 QAA, *Procedure for identifying and handling causes for concern in English institutions offering higher education programmes or awards*, Procedure for adoption from 1 March 2007

405 Ev 518

406 *As above*

407 *As above*

408 QAA, *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England: Final report*, April 2009, p 1

409 QAA, *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England: Final report*, April 2009, p 1

expect with staff in respect of individual study programmes, and the expectations that the institutions have of students as independent learners" was required[410]—chimes with many of conclusions in this Report, though in some cases we would go further than the QAA.[411] **In our view, it is matter of some regret—and a symptom of complacency—that it was only after pressure from outside the higher education sector, that is, the media, ministers and us that it appears that the QAA used the "cause for concern" process to examine more generally institutions' capacity to assure the academic standards and quality of their higher education programmes and awards. We consider that the QAA needs to make up for lost time and develop its expertise in this area. In addition, we consider that the Government and higher education institutions must find the resources to support this endeavour.**

217. We also raised the role and operation of the QAA with John Denham. While he considered that the "work of QAA in general shows that we do not have a systemic problem with quality and standards in the system", he identified three areas which "we need to look at"[412] and which he had discussed with both HEFCE and the QAA:

> The first is that the system is not very good at closing down those sorts of issues, stories and allegations that were brought before [the] Committee. We are not good enough at getting in with the individual institutions and actually having an outcome where we can say we managed to sort it out.
>
> The second thing is that it is not clear enough that essentially one body—I think it should be the QAA—has the lead responsibility for communicating to the public both here and indeed internationally the real story about the quality of higher education. I think QAA essentially services the higher education sector; the information is there but there is no obvious responsibility on anybody for communicating that effectively and for recognising how damaging it can be if an allegation—albeit a completely unsubstantiated allegation—is allowed to run for ages.
>
> The third thing is that there are some persistent issues that come up from time to time, external examiners being one, where I think it is useful to have a body that looks at that and says (as I think the QAA will do), "This is pretty much okay, but here are some ways that people could do it better; here's some good practice to handle it better". I think if the QAA were better able to make sure that the allegations that are made are sorted out, that they had a clearer responsibility for communicating quality and standards issues for the broader public and […] they do show proactively that if there are certain types of issues that keep coming up they have a look at them, then we could move forward.[413]

218. Although we found the former Secretary of State's response constructive, we would wish to question the role he appeared to envisage for the QAA. While accepting that the

410 QAA, *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England: Final report*, April 2009, para 30

411 For example, in this case we favour a code of practice on information for prospective students—see para 98.

412 Q 541

413 Q 541; see also Qq 546–50

QAA had a role in investigating and safeguarding quality in both the sector and in individual institutions, he appeared to see it also as having some of the characteristics of a public relations body charged with improving communications with the public in this country and abroad and in closing down stories. **In our view a body with responsibilities for standards which has as its primary function promoting UK higher education would be misconceived and likely to undermine faith in the quality of higher education.**

219. We accept that quality needs to be underpinned with sound processes and, indeed, also the converse that deficient or chaotic processes will undermine quality. But we do not accept that sound processes necessarily denote high quality. That is the trap that many bureaucracies and those that run them fall into. That said, in response to concerns which DIUS, HEFCE, the media and we raised, we have found that the QAA has shown itself willing to, and capable of, investigating standards and concerns about quality in higher education. **We consider that in not judging "the standards themselves", the QAA is taking an unduly limited view of its potential role.**

220. In our view the most effective way to safeguard standards and serve the public interest is to make the body responsible for supervising and reporting on standards more independent both from government and from the higher education institutions that currently subscribe to it. If we were designing a new system we would not recommend the current arrangements with the QAA reporting on processes and leaving standards to individual higher education institutions. In our view, there is a justifiable case for recommending the abolition of the QAA and starting afresh with a new body. We are, however, concerned that the inevitable hiatus, disruption and costs caused by the abolition of the QAA and the establishment of a new body would not serve the best interests of students, universities and the taxpayer. **We have concluded that, on balance, the QAA, rather than be abolished, should be reformed and re-established as a Quality and Standards Agency—possibly by Royal Charter (which was the arrangement used to set up the former Council for National Academic Awards)—with the responsibility for maintaining consistent, national standards in higher education institutions in England and for monitoring and reporting on standards. We also recommend that the remit of the new body include—if necessary, on the basis of statute—a duty to safeguard, and report on, standards in higher education in England. It should also report annually on standards to Parliament. We further recommend that, to ensure its independence, the funding of the Agency's activities in England be provided through a mechanism requiring half its funding to be provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and half from levies on higher education institutions in England. In making these recommendations we are looking to see a fundamental change in the operation of the QAA and that, if this cannot be achieved within two years, the QAA/Quality and Standards Agency should be abolished and an entirely new organisation be established in its place.**

Variations in demands made of students

221. Drawing on reports published by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)[414] we pointed out on several occasions to Vice-Chancellors that it appeared that the study time—

414 *The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities* (2007 report), HEPI, September 2007, and *The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities (*2009 Report), HEPI, May 2009

which includes lectures, tutorials and private study—for students working towards degrees in similar subjects varied significantly.[415] We were disappointed by the responses. Professor Driscoll, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex, was forceful, though not untypical, in his response:

> A couple of things to say about the HEPI studies. The ones that were carried out in 2006-07 surveyed 15,000 students. This latest update surveyed 2000 students; the report does not even say how many responded. It is a woefully small sample and I do not think that any statistician would stand by those results. The other thing that disturbs me more seriously about the conclusions of those HEPI reports is that they take one statistic—that is formal contact hours—and extrapolate some extraordinary statements about effort and the work that students do. I think it is quite unreasonable. […] what is important is not just the contact hours, it is the quality of those hours, and it is everything else that goes into that. My institution—and I am sure this is true of most institutions across the sector—produces course handbooks and in those course handbooks it describes the contact, the nature of the contact, the number of assignments they will have to do and the nature of the assessment, and it provides all the other information around the reading lists.[416]

222. It is not our job to evaluate the work of HEPI but we were concerned by the responses of the Vice-Chancellors, not just Professor Driscoll, when pressed on the apparent disparity in the levels of effort required in different universities to obtain degrees in similar subjects. First, they raised methodological questions. If the HEPI studies are as unreliable as some of the leaders of the sector appear to contend, they should commission and publish their own study but they have not sought to do so. As Professor Brown, former Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent, pointed out, the HEPI studies "were done because of no other work being done".[417] We consider that the fact that the higher education sector does not appear to have assembled its own evidence undermines the Vice-Chancellors' arguments. Second, the Vice-Chancellors' answers concentrated on contact time between staff and students. Yet the HEPI studies are explicit that they are examining total study time which is broader than contact time.[418] **We conclude that it appears that different levels of effort are required in different universities to obtain degrees in similar subjects, which may suggest that different standards may be being applied. Furthermore, the HEPI studies' consistent message is that more research is necessary in this vital area of student contact, and we conclude that those responsible for standards in higher education (both institutions and the sector level bodies) should ensure that such research is carried out.**

223. Professor Brown also commented that the notion that "British students who go to university seem to study less intensively than continental students has been validated by a number of independent surveys, so that aspect of the HEPI survey […] is right".[419] The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), in commenting on the quality of teaching provision in UK higher education, also noted the results of international

415 Qq 48–57, 419–21; HC 370–i, Qq 6–10

416 Q 419

417 Q 422

418 *The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities (*2009 Report), HEPI, May 2009, paras 1 and 15

419 Q 423

comparisons and suggested that, while the quality of teaching appeared to be relatively high within UK universities, "the level of demands made on learners and the achievements of those learners may be relatively low".[420] CHERI's general conclusions were that:

> there is some evidence to suggest that the educational experience of higher education students in the UK is in some respects somewhat less than "world class" when compared with its counterparts elsewhere in Europe. With the Bologna process of harmonisation between different higher education systems, differences may become increasingly visible. […] this may shatter some myths and any complacency about the superiority of UK higher education. [We] recommend to Government and HEFCE that further attention be given to the growing amount of research evidence on the differences (and similarities) between the higher education experiences provided by different national systems.[421]

In April 2009, HEFCE published "Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence", a report to HEFCE by CHERI. The study found that:

> When looking at students' workload overall (i.e. lectures, classes and all forms of study) two separate studies […] both found that students in the UK spent an average of about 30 hours a week on studying, the least amount of time compared to their counterparts in other European countries. […] The results of these studies support the conclusions of the HEPI report and add to the body of evidence that UK students commit fewer hours to study than students in other European countries.[422]

We add that in our discussions with students during our visit to the USA they claimed to spend up to 60 hours a week studying, that is in lectures, tutorials and private study.

224. The findings of CHERI and HEPI reports indicate that students in England may spend considerably less time studying than their counterparts in Europe or the USA. This is a potentially serious finding in view of the fact that degrees in this country are also often shorter than those overseas taking into account variations in student/staff ratios in classes compared with the UK and methods of teaching, three years compared with four. **We recommend that the Government investigate and establish whether students in England spend significantly less time studying, which includes lectures, contact time with academic staff and private study, than their counterparts overseas and that, if this proves to be the case, establish what effect this has on the standards of degrees awarded by the higher education sector in England.**

Assessment of teaching quality

225. When we took evidence at Liverpool Hope University, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pillay, was of the view that there had been an "over-emphasis […] on management of

420 Ev 243, para 4

421 Ev 244, para 10

422 www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/rdreports/2009/rd06_09/

quality rather than enhancing quality”.[423] Looking to the future he said that the QAA would have to consider:

> whether we have the same rigour in our teaching quality measurement as we have about research at the moment. Nothing […] is assessing teaching quality. Nothing is assessing yet the quality of scholarship. I do not just mean research outputs, because that is only part of what a university does. Something is going missing but I think these are the challenges and questions we raise for the future. […] I think more responsibility must be given to the university to actually show why it maintains and enhances quality, with the emphasis now on teaching quality not just on research quality.[424]

226. We found Professor Pillay’s analysis compelling. We have indicated in the previous chapter that the higher education sector needs to adopt a strategy to improve teaching and lecturer training and development and we identified two elements: professional development and universities themselves identifying and addressing poor teaching. The third element in the strategy we consider has to be supplied by an external body, a reformed QAA charged with the responsibility of monitoring, and reporting on, teaching standards, which, in our view, will act as a stimulus to improvement in teaching standards. **We conclude that the reformed QAA’s new remit should include the review of, and reporting, on the quality of teaching in universities and, where shortcomings are identified, ensuring that they are reported publicly and addressed by the institution concerned. We also conclude that the QAA should develop its current policy of giving greater attention to institutions’ policies and procedures in relation to improving quality and that the QAA should produce more guidance and feedback based on its institutional reviews.**

Institutional accreditation

227. In order to be able to award a recognised higher education degree in the UK, an organisation needs to be authorised to do so either by Royal Charter or Act of Parliament. Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 empowers the Privy Council to specify institutions of higher education as competent to grant awards, in other words to grant them powers to award their own degrees. In considering applications for such powers, the Privy Council seeks advice from the appropriate territorial minister with higher education responsibilities. In turn, the minister seeks advice from the appropriate agency.[425] In England this was DIUS (now BIS) and the QAA respectively.[426] In advising on applications, the QAA is guided by criteria and the associated evidence requirements. The

423 HC 370–i, Q 16

424 HC 370–i, Qq 16–17

425 Department for Education and Skills, *Applications for the grant of taught degree-awarding powers, research degree-awarding powers and university title Guidance for applicant organisations in England and Wales*, August 2008, para 2

426 QAA, *A brief guide to QAA's involvement in degree-awarding powers and university title*, www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/dap/briefGuideDAP.asp

QAA's work is overseen by its Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers, a sub-committee of its Board.[427]

228. Professor Baker from GuildHE explained the QAA's assessment of institutions seeking the power to award degrees:

> My own institution went through the taught degree-awarding powers assessment some three years ago, and it was a two-and-a-half-year process. Believe me, it was not easy. So I think that the QAA does have teeth; it does look very long and hard at institutions, and their quality assurance processes in particular. It does not give away the confidence vote or the taught degree-awarding powers award lightly.[428]

229. Once granted, degree awarding powers are held in perpetuity. We observe that, since the 12th century, it has been the pattern that once founded, a university was a significant national asset which was expected to endure for centuries. In the 21st century, however, we now have a diverse higher education sector in England with 133 higher education institutions. It is increasingly questionable whether we should adhere rigidly to this medieval approach to the status of universities and we see risks that it could breed complacency and become, for example, a barrier to closing an institution that deserved to have its powers removed. When, however, we suggested to Universities UK, the 1994 Group, Million+ and the Russell Group that institutional accreditation might be reviewed periodically, they unanimously rejected the idea.[429] Professor Trainor from Universities UK considered that a system that reviewed accreditation did not have "any more teeth than the [current] institutional audit system […] because *de facto*, periodically, getting a good result from the institutional audit is prerequisite for the university carrying on with its reputation in good order".[430] We were not convinced. When we were in the USA we were told that all higher education institutions had their accreditation to award degrees reviewed periodically. We cannot see why universities in England need to be excluded from a review of powers to award degrees, especially as the number, range and diversity of universities increase and include a number of private, commercial providers. It could be carried out as part of a broadened institutional review by the reformed QAA, which examined not only process but also the quality of courses and standards, and it would add discipline to the process if—in admittedly extreme cases—an institution's degree awarding powers could be revoked or curtailed. **We recommend that all higher education institutions in England have their accreditation to award degrees reviewed no less often than every 10 years by the reformed QAA. Where the Agency concludes that all or some of an institution's powers should be withdrawn, we recommend that the Government draw up and put in place arrangements which would allow accreditation to award degrees to be withdrawn or curtailed by the Agency.**

230. As we have explained we envisage that the review of degree awarding powers could be part of the periodic institutional review. There may, exceptionally, be a need to review

427 Department for Education and Skills, *Applications for the grant of taught degree-awarding powers, research degree-awarding powers and university title Guidance for applicant organisations in England and Wales*, August 2008, para 21 ff. and Appendix 1

428 Q 102

429 Q 45

430 Q 46

these powers in the period between institutional reviews. In our view, there needs to be a trigger for an exceptional review. **We recommend that the reformed QAA have powers to carry out reviews of the quality of, and standards applied in, the assessment arrangements for an institution's courses, including, if necessary, its degree awarding powers, in response to external examiners' or public concerns about the standards in an institution or at the direction of the Secretary of State.**

Whistle-blowers

231. We received a small number of submissions from academics alleging that their attempts to raise concerns about standards in their institutions had been suppressed by their university authorities.[431] As the focus of our inquiry was the experience of students and because a select committee is not generally an appropriate or effective forum for the pursuit of what are individual circumstances, we decided not to investigate each of these cases. We did wish to establish, however, whether these cases were *prima facie* evidence of a systematic failure within the higher education sector. In its written evidence the University and College Union (UCU) told us that it received "occasional reports from members about pressure to admit or to pass students, or to approve new programmes, against their academic judgement".[432] UCU explained that institutions were also under pressure in the "higher education marketplace" not to disclose concerns about their own standards.[433] An academic, Dr Dearden, said in a written submission that academic standards had been compromised by amongst other factors, "management pressure on academic staff to 'fully utilise the range of marks' and, in the extreme case, the threat of loss of teaching leading to staff priming students on exam content" and he said that much of the compromise in standards was impossible to identify through formal monitoring procedures.[434]

232. The oral evidence we received from some academics seemed to confirm this picture. Dr Fenton told us that staff who were vulnerable, especially younger members or newer members to the profession, who had "not got as much clout, standing or protection within the institution[, were] very nervous about speaking out, or recommending that certain students should not be getting certain grades".[435] Another academic, Dr Reid, in giving oral evidence, explained that:

> There is no doubt there is nothing an institution values more closely than its external reputation, and they are very protective of that. I know people certainly feel as though they cannot speak out; they cannot even speak out in their own department's staff meetings, never mind to colleagues from *The Times Higher* who may be interested.[436]

431 For example, Ev 500 (Professor El-Sayed), Ev 537 [WJ Cairns]

432 Ev 499, para 21

433 *As above*

434 Ev 513, para 5

435 Q 479

436 Q 480; see also Q 477

233. When it gave oral evidence UCU was, understandably, reluctant to cite specific cases of bullying[437] but it indicated that "our colleagues certainly are telling us it is getting worse".[438] We pressed for general information[439] and in a supplementary memorandum UCU drew attention to a press release it had issued on 6 November 2008 on bullying at work.[440] The release goes wider than bullying over standards. It related to individual academics' capacity to "speak out" with regard to areas of research that were prioritised, the university's reputation and more general questioning of management policy. The release said that a survey of 9,700 members working in higher education revealed that 6.7% of members said they were "always" or "often" bullied at work and 16.7% said "sometimes". Only half (51%) said they had "never" been bullied at work.[441]

234. In its original memorandum the UCU stated that the "Whistleblowing procedures and the academic freedom protections" in the 1988 Education Reform Act had "proved to be inadequate in protecting academic whistleblowers".[442] We noted one instance where this appeared to be a problem. This was where an academic who had raised concerns about standards then left a higher education institution after signing a confidentiality agreement.[443] It appears that the whistle-blowing procedures in the 1988 Act would not give protection from action by the institution for breach of contract to an academic seeking to raise concerns about standards at the higher education institution. We make no comment about the merits of the case raised with us but it does highlight a wider concern about the system: confidentiality agreements preventing the operation of the whistle-blowing provisions in the 1988 Act where the whistle-blower has concerns about standards may not be the public interest.

235. It appears to us that the current protections within the sector and the internal arrangements of some higher education institutions may not provide sufficient protection to whistle-blowers raising, in good faith, potentially serious concerns about standards at higher education institutions. The pressures within the system to protect the reputation of the institution are so strong that they risk not only sweeping problems under the mat but isolating and ostracising unjustly those raising legitimate concerns. It is not acceptable that the only avenue available to some of those who considered themselves aggrieved was to raise their concerns through the immunity provided by us as a select committee of the House of Commons when we accepted their representations as evidence. **We see grounds for concluding that the system for reviewing the concerns of academics about standards needs to be rebalanced to provide greater protection for those raising concerns alongside a clear move to independent and external review. Our initial view is that such a service which provides, for example, independent arbitration and adjudication might be the responsibility of a reformed QAA. We also recommend that Government bring forward legislation to strengthen the whistle-blowing procedures in the 1988 Education**

437 Q 482

438 Q 484

439 Q 483

440 Ev 531

441 Ev 531; see also "'Bullied' academics' blog attack", *BBC*, 8 May 2007

442 Ev 499, para 21

443 Ev 500 (Professor El-Sayed)

Reform Act to provide greater protection to academics. We are reluctant to go further and to reach firm conclusions without carrying out a more detailed inquiry into adequacy of the protection for whistle-blowers within higher education—and this is an issue that a successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education may wish to return to—but on the basis of the evidence from individual academics and the UCU we consider that there could be a systematic problem here.

Manchester Metropolitan University

236. There was one case concerning an allegation about standards where we became involved. This concerned Walter Cairns, Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, who submitted written evidence to our inquiry which was critical of the University's marking processes and he told us that, as a consequence, he was removed from the Academic Board of the University—see chapter 6. The case does raise a point of general application and relevance to this chapter. **The case of Mr Cairns, the details of which we set out in chapter 6 of this Report, reinforces our uneasiness about the adequacy of the internal systems within higher education institutions to resolve disputes involving those who raise concerns about standards. In our view, the ability of an academic to appeal to an external, independent body would provide a safety-value for potentially explosive disputes.** At a late stage in our inquiry, a second academic from Manchester Metropolitan University, Susan Evans, made a complaint about the University's response to her evidence. We also deal with her representations at chapter 6.

The autonomy of higher education institutions

237. The question of standards in the higher education sector highlighted the issue of autonomy of higher education institutions, which arose at several points during this inquiry. Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE, described higher education institutions as "private bodies serving public functions".[444] To avoid any confusion we must make it clear that we have not examined in this inquiry academic freedom, which is held to be central to the role of universities as institutions and their academic staff as individuals in advancing knowledge and critical education, and is often defined as the "right of each individual member of the faculty of an institution to enjoy the freedom to study, to inquire, to speak his mind, to communicate his ideas, and to assert the truth as he sees it".[445] Nor are we questioning what the Robbins Report called the individual freedom[446] of the academic, though on occasion, as we noted in the evidence from the UCU, there was a potential for tension between an individual's academic freedom to comment on standards and the actions of university management. Our main difficulty was understanding the extent and range of the autonomy that higher education institutions have—what the Robbins Report called "institutional freedom".[447] We found ourselves drawing some comparison with the operation of the so-called Haldane Principle, which has featured in

444 Q 517

445 Dictionary of the History of Ideas at etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhiana.cgi?id=dv1-02

446 *Robbins Report*, para 705–06

447 *Robbins Report*, para 707ff

our inquiries into the allocation of resources for scientific research.[448] The Haldane Principle is taken to hold that the scientific research councils (and universities) should choose which research to support on scientific criteria at "arms length" from the Government and political considerations. The most striking parallel was that, while all parties supported the principle of autonomy and had a general idea what it meant, its detailed operation was far from clear.

238. It is instructive to start with the 1963 Robbins Report which saw *institutional* freedom as encompassing (with in some cases a limited role for government) appointments, curricula and standards, admission of students, the balance between teaching and research, freedom of development and salaries and staffing ratios.[449] When we asked Dr Hood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, what autonomy Oxford had, his answer showed that the institutional freedom of the 1960s had reduced. He replied:

> We have autonomy and we protect our autonomy in the sense of academic freedom but we do not have autonomy in the sense that we are unregulated, that we are in a non-compliant regime, for example, where we set our own regulatory framework, our own compliance norms, quite the contrary. The Government's funding, be it teaching funding or research funding or funding for various outreach purposes or for tech transfer purposes comes with very prescriptive conditions attaching to it and very strong audit and other related requirements.[450]

239. We asked John Denham about the extent to which he was able to direct the higher education sector given the dependence of the sector on government for financial support. He took the example of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which we examine at paragraph 261 and following. He explained that it "would not have happened without ministers saying to the sector that there is an issue here and we have to grasp it. That is seen as a product of the sector and the HEAR Report is being accepted around the sector because it is owned by them."[451] In our view, this approach is to be commended but we have reservations that it may come under pressure—and the pattern since the 1960s shows a growing role for government in "institutional" matters in higher education institutions—and we consider that a clearer arrangement is needed in the 21st century.

240. It is worth noting that the Government did not adopt the approach based on the dialogue Mr Denham outlined to us when, last year, it withdrew resources for those undertaking equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs) with the result that their fees increased. Instead, it withdrew the funding by means of a directive issued to HEFCE.[452] As well as the constraints Dr Hood described, we would add that, from our experience in this inquiry, there is also within universities the constraint of managerialism as managers align the work of their staff to their strategic goals. As the financial effects of the recession build

448 Fourth Report of Session 2007–08, *Science Budget Allocations*, HC 215–i, paras 20–27; Eighth Report of Session 2008–09, *Putting Science and Engineering at the Heart of Government Policy*, HC 168-I, para 138ff

449 *Robbins Report*, para 707 ff.

450 HC 370–ii, Q 175

451 Q 507

452 See Third Report of Session 2007–08, *Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)*, HC 178–i, para 2.

we would expect the pressures on universities from government above and within institutions to increase.

241. The lack of clarity about institutional autonomy in the higher education sector also makes it difficult to see where responsibility for delivering government policy lies when matters do not work out as planned. For example, in the case of widening participation, which we examined at chapter 2, we were told by the sector that they were "doing somersaults, metaphorically speaking, to try to encourage applications from a broader spectrum"[453] and that many of the levers to widen participation were not, as we have noted, within their grasp but arose from schooling and family circumstances.[454] On the other hand, when Oxford and Cambridge recently fell short of their benchmarks for students from state schools, the former Secretary of State said that the figures showed that there were "wide variations between the performance of different institutions against their benchmarks in […] widening participation[...] We need to explain why this is if we are to make further progress which is why I am writing to HEFCE today to explore what further action we can take and what part the QAA could play in creating greater visibility and a better understanding […] variations between institutions".[455]

242. We consider that both the higher education sector—academics, managers and students—and government would benefit if the roles and responsibilities of each were set out in a concordat. We do not envisage a detailed legal document but an agreed set of principles governing the relationship between the government and the sector. **We recommend that the Government request HEFCE, the higher education sector and student bodies to draw up, and seek to agree, a concordat defining those areas over which universities have autonomy, including a definition of academic freedom and, on the other side, those areas where the Government, acting on behalf of the taxpayer, can reasonably and legitimately lay down requirements or intervene.** Drawing on the issues raised across this inquiry we set out in chapter 7 some matters which we suggest could be included in a concordat.

Degree classification

Grade inflation

243. The table below sets out first degrees awarded by UK higher education institutions by class of degree. The figures for 1997–98 to 2007–08 were supplied by DIUS and are taken from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record which is collected annually.[456] Because HESA has also published figures from 1994–95 we have added these to the sequence in italics, though they are not recorded on the same basis as the later figures.

453 Q 400

454 Ev 182 (Professor Gorard); Ev 322 (157 Group), paras 4–5; Ev 345 (1994 Group), para 3; Ev 402, 404–07 (Russell Group); Ev 437 (Universities UK), para 9; Ev 506 (NAO), para 20; Q 85 (Professor Baker); Q 145 (Mr Streeting); see also Ev 160 (Informal meeting with Liverpool Hope students), Ev 162 (Informal meeting with University of Oxford students); Ev 166 (E-Consultation).

455 "DIUS response to HESA performance indicators", DIUS Press Release, 4 June 2009

456 Ev 534

Table 5: Degrees by class awarded by UK higher education institution

Year	1st	Upper second	Lower second	Third/ pass	Total classified	Unclassified	Un-known	All
1994-95	*16,687*	*95,824*	*82,898*	*41,644*	*237,053*	*		
1995-96	*17,305*	*102,720*	*89,146*	*42,077*	*251,248*	*		
1996-97	*18,079*	*104,949*	*90,802*	*22,190*	*236,020*	*19,240*		
1997-98	19,470	108,590	89,490	21,205	238,755	18,160	1,840	258,755
1998-99	20,730	111,750	92,050	20,830	245,355	18,315	0	263,670
1999-00	21,770	113,740	90,300	20,110	245,920	19,350	0	265,270
2000-01	24,095	118,460	89,750	21,150	253,455	19,205	0	272,665
2001-02	26,455	121,240	86,650	19,620	253,965	20,470	0	274,440
2002-03	28,635	123,800	88,260	20,670	261,365	21,010	0	282,380
2003-04	30,175	127,935	90,470	20,785	269,365	22,725	0	292,090
2004-05	32,465	132,770	92,610	22,290	280,135	26,235	0	306,365
2005-06	34,825	137,235	94,265	22,845	289,170	26,815	0	315,985
2006-07	36,645	138,745	92,795	23,195	291,380	27,880	0	319,260
2007-08	41,150	148,265	95,145	23,990	308,550	26,260	80	334,890
Proportions								
Year	**1st**	**Upper second**	**Lower second**	**Third/ pass**	**Total classified**			
1996-97	*7.7%*	*44.5%*	*38.5%*	*9.4%*	*100.0%*			
1997-98	8.2%	45.5%	37.5%	8.9%	100.0%			
1998-99	8.4%	45.5%	37.5%	8.5%	100.0%			
1999-00	8.9%	46.3%	36.7%	8.2%	100.0%			
2000-01	9.5%	46.7%	35.4%	8.3%	100.0%			
2001-02	10.4%	47.7%	34.1%	7.7%	100.0%			
2002-03	11.0%	47.4%	33.8%	7.9%	100.0%			
2003-04	11.2%	47.5%	33.6%	7.7%	100.0%			

2005-06	12.0%	47.5%	32.6%	7.9%	100.0%	
2006-07	12.6%	47.6%	31.8%	8.0%	100.0%	
2007-08	13.3%	48.1%	30.8%	7.8%	100.0%	
*	Third and/Pass includes 'Unknown' class of degree; lower second includes 'Undivided' second class.					

244. Professor Yorke, in a paper he supplied with his written evidence, identified the "good honours degree" as an upper second or a first class honours degree which was "often taken as a yardstick of success, in that it opens doors to careers and other opportunities that would generally remain closed to graduates with lower classes of honours" that is lower second and third class honours.[457] Professor Yorke has analysed the detailed data behind the figures in the table above. He commented that:

> The analyses [in his paper] for the period 1994–2002 showed that the percentage of "good honours degrees" […] tended to rise in almost all subject areas. When the award data were disaggregated by institutional type, the rises were most apparent in the elite "Russell Group" universities.
>
> Similar analyses for the period 2002–2007 showed that there was still a general tendency for the percentage of "good honours degrees" to rise, but that the strongest rises were scattered more evenly throughout institutional types.[458]

245. We put on record our thanks to Professor Yorke and also to Professor Longden for the interest that they have taken in our inquiry and their diligence in supplying statistical information and analyses. Professor Yorke suggested a number of possible reasons for the changes he observed.

> *Amongst those likely to influence an upward movement in classifications were*:

- Improvements in teaching
- Greater student diligence
- Curricula being expressed in terms of specific learning outcomes which gave students a clear indication of what they need to achieve
- Students being 'strategic' about curricular choices
- Developments in assessment methods.

> *Changes in the way that classifications were determined*:

- The significance for institutions of 'league tables'.

457 "Eddies in the current? Trends in honours degree classifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2002–07", Mantz Yorke, Visiting Professor, Lancaster University, Paper presented on 9 December 2008 at the Society for Research into Higher Education held in Liverpool Conference, Liverpool, Ev 202

458 Ev 201, para 4–5

Classifications may be influenced downwards by:

- Student part-time employment
- The distraction from teaching of other demands on academics' time.

The following might also be influential, but it was unclear what their effects might be:

- Changes in institutions' student entry profiles
- Changes in the portfolios of subjects offered by institutions.[459]

246. Several academics stated that standards had, or were, declining.

> [A] typical degree awarded in the Arts & Humanities (I cannot speak for other areas) is worth less than its equivalent of even five years ago, and certainly less than ten or twenty years ago. This is despite the proliferation of quality controls, some aspects of which, I believe, contribute to declining standards.[460]
>
> Despite educating more students, who are less well selected, and with resources stretched more thinly, increasing numbers of university students obtain a 2:1 or a 1st class degree. This indicates an obvious decline in standards. […] For my final year course I have received essays that were almost impossible to follow, largely empty of content, a regurgitation of lecture notes or basic textbooks and factually incorrect. I routinely awarded these essays low grades but have been brought under pressure, internally and externally, to provide higher grades.[461]
>
> To those of us who have been involved in the assessment of law subjects taught at the level of higher education, it is obvious that standards have dropped substantially. […]This is not only the case, as is generally believed, because of the incidence of course work and of "seen" examination papers. It also has to do with the manner in which the various assessed elements—whether in the form of examinations, tests, essays and other items of coursework—are evaluated and marked. More particularly it relates to a tacit understanding amongst university staff that assessment levels and methods shall be geared mainly, if not exclusively, to the need to retain as many students as possible for the subsequent years and for graduation.[462]

We also found of interest the comment of a mature student who, having obtained a degree in engineering 25 years earlier, returned to university to obtain an MSc in Biological Sciences and so was studying alongside students who had come through the system a generation later. He said that "much of what I had learnt at school now had to be taught at University, inevitably pushing out other material that would otherwise have been taught".[463]

459 Ev 201, para 6

460 Ev 258 (Dr Penhallurick), para 4

461 Ev 212 (Dr Derbyshire), para 3

462 Ev 538 (Mr Cairns), para 4

463 Ev 344 (Mr Dyer)

247. With a few exceptions such as the Quality Strategy Network,[464] we found that representatives from the sector were not inclined to engage in a detailed examination of the trend Professor Yorke observed. Professor Trainor from Universities UK, while acknowledging that there had been “a lot of talk and publicity on this in the last six months or so, about degree classification, and so on”, noted that “the patterns of degree classification have not changed all that much over the last ten years—only a six per cent rise in the percentage of Firsts and 2.1s”.[465] John Denham appeared to make a similar point:

> The proportion of graduates who were awarded a first went from 8.1% to 13.3%; upper seconds increased from 45.1% to 48%. If you look at how many people got them, you are ignoring the fact that far more people go to university, so the significance is that if you start in a particular year what is your chance of getting a higher degree? Those figures would not suggest to me that you have rampant grade inflation in the way that some people are saying.[466]

248. We found Mr Denham’s explanation unsatisfactory. Both he and Professor Trainor appear to have ignored the overall percentage increase by emphasising, or confusing it with, the percentage point increase. The figures in the above table show a clear trend: a steady increase in the proportion of first degree students achieving first class honours from 7.7% in 1996–97 to 13.3% in 2007–08, which is an increase over the period of 72%. The trend on the proportion of upper seconds is not so pronounced but is still significant. The trend for lower seconds is pronounced: downwards with some exceptions. Thirds appear, since 2002–03, to have stabilised at around 8%. Today, 61% of classified degrees awarded are either first or upper seconds, compared with 53% in 1996–97, again a pronounced trend showing an increase of 15%. The changes between 1996–97 and 2007–08 are shown in the two pie charts below.

464 Ev 320, para 17

465 Q 42

466 Q 544

Chart 1: Proportion of classes of honours degrees in 1996–97

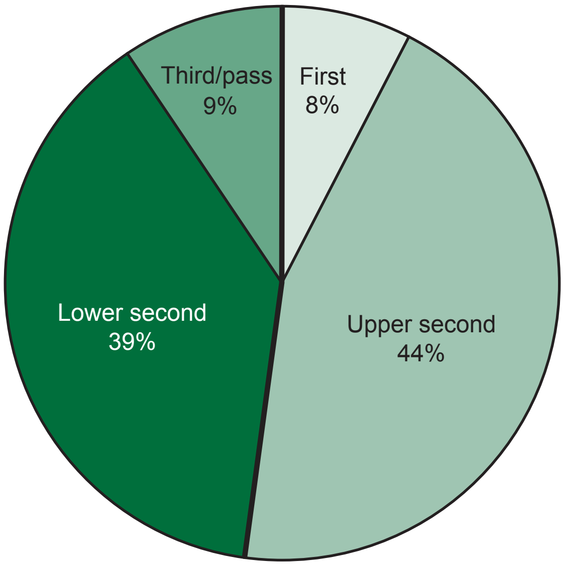
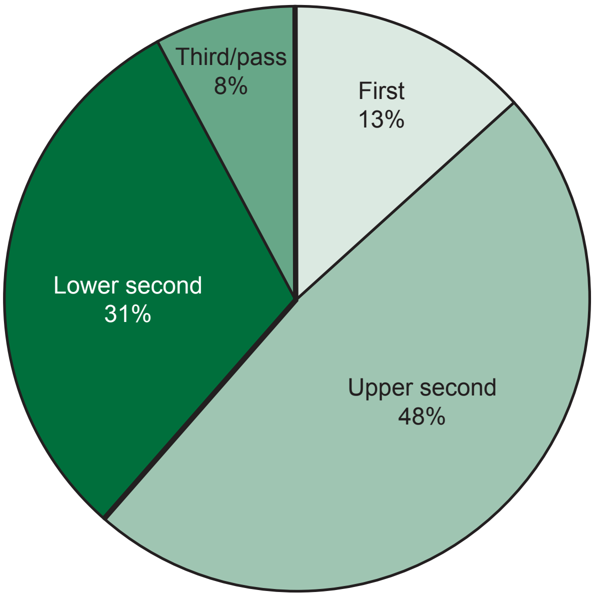


Chart 2: Proportion of classes of honours degrees in 2007–08



249. The Russell Group said that there was no evidence of "degree inflation" at the expense of standards at Russell Group universities. It pointed out that research from HEFCE had

> demonstrated a strong correlation between entry qualifications and degree results that continues to exist. The increase in the percentage of Russell Group students gaining firsts and 2:1s from 1994–2002 correlates with a rise in the entrants' qualifications and an increase in standards at the time the Russell Group was established.[467]

250. In our view, it is not a sufficient defence of the comparability of standards to show that they match the improvement in A-level grades. On this logic, if A-level grades have inflated unjustifiably (and there are many who think they have), then so must higher education

467 Ev 414, para 54

degree classes. Imperial College London said that the "improvement in A Level grades has not been accompanied by a comparable increase in knowledge and understanding".[468]

251. The research by Professor Yorke shows that since 1994–95 the proportion of first and upper second honours degrees has increased and the proportion of lower second class honours degrees has decreased. We made little progress in establishing the reasons for these changes and we found no appetite within the higher education sector for a systematic analysis of the reasons for the increase in the proportion of first and upper second honours degrees. We found it telling that Professor Yorke in his memorandum called for a study to be undertaken of the influences upon the classification of honours degrees. As a Committee we are reluctant to recommend more research but in this case we consider that there is a strong case for a study along the lines suggested by Professor Yorke, in order to establish the reasons for the increases in firsts and upper seconds and to remove suspicions of what, we hope, are unfounded misgivings that the increase may result from factors other than greater intellectual achievement. **We recommend that the Higher Education Funding Council for England commission a study to examine the influences upon the classification of honours degrees since 1994 and that this be undertaken in a representative range of subject disciplines.**

Comparison of degrees

252. Equally frustrating was our attempt to establish whether the outcomes of degrees were comparable across the higher education sector. We asked Professor Goodman of the University of Oxford to define the difference between the classes of honours degree. He explained:

> The criteria that we use in our university which we ask people to mark against is a 2:2 shows you have done the work, you have understood the work and you are quite comfortable with the work, a 2:1 is somebody who is actually able to use the work and show that they can unpick the question and work around the question and use it in a critical way, and a first class examination answer is something that really takes you to another level. It is a pleasure to read, you know that there is something going on there, that it is doing something very, very interesting with the work.[469]

He added:

> Examiners very rarely disagree about that 2:1 and the first class category. I find elsewhere as well—I taught briefly at the University of Essex and the very best students at the University of Essex were definitely as good as the ones here in that first class bracket.[470]

253. We found Professor Goodman's definition useful as it was capable of application across subjects and institutions and should mean that a student attaining a first class honours degree at the University of Oxford is the equivalent of a student with a first from the University of Essex. When, however, we pressed Vice-Chancellors on the comparability

468 Ev 350, para 7

469 HC 370–ii, Q274

470 *As above*

of degrees the position was less clear. In its written evidence Universities UK submitted that, although degrees were "different and more diverse with far more choices available to students and employers than in the past, […] all courses are subject to the same processes to ensure a minimum 'threshold standard' is maintained"[471] and that "while the content of courses may differ, the level of understanding required in each case across different universities will be broadly equivalent".[472] When we took oral evidence, we asked the Vice-Chancellors of Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford whether upper seconds in history from their respective universities were equivalent. Professor Beer, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes, replied:

> It depends what you mean by equivalent. I am sorry to quibble around the word but is it worth the same is a question that is weighted with too many social complexities. In terms of the way in which quality and standards are managed in the university I have every confidence that a 2:1 in history from Oxford Brookes is of a nationally recognised standard.[473]

When asked the same question Dr Hood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, responded:

> We teach in very different ways between the two institutions and I think our curricula are different between the two institutions, so the question really is are we applying a consistent standard in assessing our students as to firsts, 2:1s, 2:2s *et cetera*? What I want to say in that respect is simply this, that we use external examiners to moderate our examination processes in all of our disciplinary areas at Oxford, and we take that external examination assessment very, very seriously. The external examiners' reports after each round are submitted through our faculty boards, they are assessed and considered by the faculty boards, they are then assessed at the divisional board level and by the educational committee of the university. This is a process that goes on round the clock annually, so we would be comfortable that our degree classifications are satisfying an expectation of national norms.[474]

254. We asked John Denham a similar question—whether a first in geography from the University of Oxford was the same as a first in geography from Southampton Solent University—and he replied along the same lines:

> I think the institutions are different institutions. The teaching may well be different. The nature of the staff may be different. There will be some nationally agreed reference points in the academic infrastructure about what should be in the course and each institution will have its own system for verifying the quality and standards of it. People are studying the same subject in different institutions. Where I am reluctant to go is into an argument about better or worse. A lot is going to depend on

471 Ev 439, para 20

472 Ev 439, para 21

473 HC 370–ii, Q 201

474 HC 370–ii, Q 203 (Dr Hood)

> the individual student, the nature of the study and what they are going to get out of it.[475]

255. We found these answers unclear. Nor did we find the other arguments deployed by universities convincing when we raised the question of comparisons. First, the argument that a comparison of degree outcomes across the sector would require national curricula and national testing[476] rests, in our view, on the unqualified proposition that the only method to achieve comparability is via the single route of national tests. We consider that national standards can be established and enforced by other methods such as peer review against a national standard—a development of the role conventionally played by external examiners. Second, the argument was put forward that minimum standards, not comparability, was the issue.[477] We fail to see why minimum standards should be a substitute for the comparison of excellence. Both are important.

256. With 133 institutions the higher education sector is diverse. While we celebrate and encourage the diversity of the higher education sector in England, it is our view that there need to be some common reference points. We consider that standards have to be capable of comprehensive and consistent application across the sector. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, students, understandably, want to know the worth of their degrees. We were therefore concerned when staff at Imperial College London informed the Chairman of the Committee during his visit as a rapporteur that some academics had noticed that masters students enrolled at Imperial, who had graduated from certain other universities with first class honours degrees, sometimes struggled at Imperial College.[478] We consider that this could be evidence of a devaluation of degrees in those institutions. **We consider that so long as there is a classification system it is essential that it should categorise all degrees against a consistent set of standards across all higher education institutions in England.** Such work will need to build upon work previously undertaken by the QAA and other bodies with responsibilities for accreditation of degrees such as those in engineering. On the basis of the evidence we received, however, we have concerns that the higher education sector neither sees the need for this step nor is willing to implement it across the sector as whole. We consider that this is a task that would fit well within the work of the reformed QAA. **We conclude that a key task of a reformed QAA, in consultation with higher education institutions and government, should be to define the characteristics of each class of honours degree and to ensure that the standards which each university draws up and applies are derived from these classification standards.**

Methods of assessment

257. In its evidence, the Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe) argued that there were "numerous and significant methodological flaws in current assessment practice at both the macro level of degree classification, and at the micro level of the assessment of individual students" which meant that "there should be growing concern about the

475 Q 553

476 Q 416 (Professor Arthur)

477 Q 416 (Professor Brown)

478 Ev 157

integrity of the degree as a qualification and what it means to be a graduate."[479] ASKe in its memorandum drew on the published work of Dr Rust, from Oxford Brookes University, who provided examples of "major questionable beliefs and bad practices in the system":

a) the practice of combining scores, which obscured the different types of learning outcome represented by the separate scores; and

b) the practice of combining scores where the variation (standard deviation) for each component is different.

Dr Rust commented that this latter example "would be unacceptable in the practice of a first year statistics student, but university assessment systems do this all the time, both within modules, and in combining the total marks from different modules or units of study."[480]

258. In its memorandum the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG), on whose behalf Dr Rust gave oral evidence, indicated that there was "considerable variation across the higher education sector in assessment practices. Whilst this can be seen as a consequence of institutional autonomy, the rationales for the various institutional choices that have been made are unclear."[481] The memorandum cited research which showed that:

> Quite small variations in the way in which degree classifications are determined (the "award algorithm") can have more effect on the classification of some students than is probably generally realised. Running a set of results through other institutional award algorithms produces different profiles of classifications.[482]
>
> A number of institutions permit a small proportion of module results to be dropped from the determination of the class of the honours degree (provided all the relevant credits are gained). Dropping the "worst" 30 credit points from the normal 240 of the final two years of full-time study might raise one classification in six, and (separately) changing the ratio of weightings of results from the penultimate year to the final year from 1:1 to 1:3 might change one classification in ten, the majority of changes being upwards.[483]
>
> Marks for coursework assignments tend to be higher than those for formal examinations, though some instances were found where the reverse was the case.[484]
>
> The distribution of marks (usually in the form of percentages) varies between subject disciplines in terms of both mean mark and spread.[485]

479 Ev 194, para 3.1

480 Ev 195, para 3.3.5

481 Ev 223

482 Ev 221, para 7

483 Ev 221, para 8

484 Ev 221, para 9

485 Ev 221, para 10

> A study of assessment regulations across 35 varied institutions in the UK showed that there were considerable variations between them […]. Amongst the variations were the following:
>
> - The weightings in the award algorithm ranging between 1:1 and 1:4 for penultimate final year;
> - The treatment of "borderline" performances as regards classification;
> - The adoption (or not) of "compensation" (i.e. allowing weakness in one aspect to be offset against strength in another) and "condonement" (i.e. not requiring a relatively minor failure to be redeemed);
> - The "capping" of marks for re-taken assessments (at the level of a bare pass).[486]

259. The evidence from ASKe and SACWG was underscored by a number of academics with responsibility for assessing students.[487] Dr Reid explained in oral evidence that:

> my university runs what has been described as a very perverse model for classifying degree schemes, and it was my external examiner who called it perverse. What happens is that low marks between 0 and 20 are rounded up to 20 and high marks from 80 to 100 are rounded downwards, and then they are averaged together, so you have this non-linear average before making a classification.[488]

260. The evidence we received on assessment methodologies gave us serious grounds for concern. First, there needs to be transparency about the methodological assumptions underpinning the assessments used by universities. **We recommend that the government require those higher education institutions in receipt of support from the taxpayer to publish the details of the methodological assumptions underpinning assessments for all degrees.** We would expect greater transparency of these methods to expose any methodological flaws that those who gave evidence suggest are present. We believe that publication would allow the QAA, even under its current remit which is limited to the examination of "process", to review comprehensively the methodologies used by universities. **We conclude that the QAA should review the methodological assumptions underpinning assessments for degrees to ensure that they meet acceptable statistical practice.**

Record of achievement

261. Universities UK made the point that any system which attempted to summarise the achievement of students on a wide variety of programmes in a large number of institutions to a single, common, summative judgement was a "blunt instrument".[489] Universities UK agreed with the finding of the Burgess Group, which it and GuildHE had established in 2004, that the current undergraduate degree classification system did not adequately

486 Ev 222, para 13

487 For example, Ev 537 (Mr Cairns)

488 Q 469

489 Ev 439, para 28

represent the achievement of students in a modern, diverse higher education system, though it noted that it was easier to identify the problems with the current system than to reach consensus on what should replace it.[490] The Burgess Group's Report[491] published in 2007 recommended that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) should become the main vehicle for measuring and recording a student's achievement. The report proposed that the HEAR should be developed and tested over a four-year period alongside the existing degree classification system. Following consultation and development work, the Burgess Implementation Steering Group is now working with a wide range of universities across the UK—with support from the funding bodies of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales—to trial the new approach. Initially, the HEAR was tested on data relating to recently graduated students to ensure that it is compatible with student record systems. It will then be trialled with current students, alongside current methods of recording student achievement.[492]

262. We found broad support across the sector, and beyond it, for the HEAR.[493] Professor Ebdon from Million+ considered the current classification system was outmoded. He explained:

> It always used to strike me as a chemist that I would be telling my students not to average the unaverageable, and then I would walk into an examination board and do exactly that! As a chemist, I know very well that some people have very strong practical skills; others are stronger theoretically. I would like to be able to identify that, and I think that the higher education achievement record will enable us to do that. I am therefore strongly in favour of that.[494]

263. There were two issues that concerned those who submitted evidence to us. First, whether the HEAR, if it emerged successfully from the trials, would replace the current honours classification system. The Institute of Directors (IoD) disagreed with the "Burgess Group assertion that there is 'conclusive evidence' that while the summative judgement 'endures', it will actively inhibit the use of wider information".[495] The IoD called for the summative judgement—in other words, the current classification system—to be retained permanently as part of the HEAR.[496] In oral evidence, the IoD explained that it did not "argue the system is perfect but it is a very useful and very simple metric very early on in the recruitment process to give an indication of the overall calibre of an applicant."[497] Similarly, the Engineering Council UK (EC^{UK}) saw a role for both: it welcomed the "recommendations of the Burgess Report, in particular the introduction of the HE

490 Ev 439, para 28

491 Universities UK, *Beyond the honours degree classification: Burgess Group Final Report*, October 2007, at www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf

492 "Institutions pilot new student achievement report", Universities UK Press Release, 21 October 2008

493 Ev 196 (ASKe), para 3.5; Ev 239 (QAA), para 5.1; Ev 263 (NUS), para 19; Ev 306 (Higher Education Academy), para 2.5; Ev 310 and 314 (Million+); Ev 330 (University of the Creative Arts), para 11.5; Ev 367 (EC^{UK}), para 9; Ev 435 (Birmingham City University), para 3.4.1; Ev 498 (UCU), para 17

494 Q 44

495 Ev 333, para 8

496 Ev 333, para 9

497 HC 370–iii, Q 371

Achievement Record (HEAR) alongside the current honours degree classification system".[498]

264. We agree with the employers' representatives. While we fully support the work of the Burgess Group in developing the HEAR, we consider that it would be precipitate to replace the summative judgment provided by the current classification system. It will take employers and those outside the higher education sector some time to become familiar with, and accept, any new system based on the HEAR. Speaking as lay people we understand why employers and others may require a summary judgement as well as a detailed review of a student's achievements, which is unlikely to be useful in an initial trawl of applications for jobs. We are therefore concerned that any abrupt switch would risk undermining the excellent work the Burgess Group has done, especially if the inevitable complexities of the system foster unwarranted suspicions that it is masking further grade "inflation". In our view, the higher education sector should run the two together for a significant period after the end of the trial and allow the current classification system either to wither on the vine or to survive if experience shows that it is wanted. **We conclude that the HEAR and the current honours degree classification system should run in parallel for at least five years.**

265. The second concern was whether the HEAR should include non-academic achievements (including non-assessed work-based learning, and personal qualities extended through paid employment). Carrie Donaghy, a student on the panel that returned to give oral evidence in April, believed that the current degree classification was "outdated and rigid" and that it bore "no reflection of students' contributions to sport and volunteering".[499] She said that she had consulted her fellow students who believed that the HEAR project was going to be "an excellent way to keep the traditional elements of the degree classification" which employers recognise but also give "something further for employers to consider, because the ideal candidates […] for jobs are often those who are involved with things like volunteering and sport, they are more social, they are team-players and team-leaders and the HEAR pilot will really see this through".[500] The counter view was given by another student, Anand Raja, who returned in April:

> University is a place where you go to learn, just as a hospital is a place where you go to get treatment, it is not a place where you go for entertainment. Our universities are for learning; that should be kept in focus. Also the idea that including such variables in the degree would help employers make better sense of what a person is like is a good idea but it is not necessary to include those variables in the degree because you can always write about them in your CV.[501]

266. The HEAR as currently drafted would provide, by comparison with the current degree classification system, much more information and there were some concerns that the HEAR could be unwieldy. As Ed Steward, a student, said to us, it should not be "a short synopsis of every course you have done and you end up handing a booklet over to your

498 Ev 367, para 9

499 HC 370–iii, Q 422

500 *As above*

501 HC 370–iii, Q 423

employer […] and we end up with far too much information for employers."[502] There is, however, a question about accessibility and balance within a HEAR document, including the fact that much of the information which might be provided is, *de facto*, probably already available within institutions at the point a student leaves but not currently brought together in a coherent whole. We also consider that inclusion of information beyond the academic could act as a stimulus to students to broaden their skills while at university and that it has the potential to affect a student's attitude to, and involvement in, higher education; it could, for example, help to diminish non-completion rates. **We conclude that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) should record academic achievement and reflect significant non-academic achievement. The record will, however, need to be carefully structured to enable a convenient reading of academic achievement separate from other activity. Furthermore, we consider that, as part of the review of the HEAR pilot, various good practice models incorporating the range of academic and non-academic elements, should be provided to enable those who will use the HEAR—for example, employers, those providing training and students themselves—to gain ready access to the information required.**

External Examiners

267. When we turned to consider the role and value of the external examiner system, we found it illuminating to start with what the Robbins Report said in 1963 on standards:

> [S]tandards vary to some extent: such variations are in the nature of things. But an autonomous institution should be free to establish and maintain its own standards of competence without reference to any central authority. The habit of appointing external examiners from other universities and the obvious incentive to maintain a high place in public esteem provide in our judgment a sufficient safeguard against any serious abuse of this liberty.[503]

268. The one part of the system that the Robbins Report described nearly 50 years ago that still appears recognisable is the role of the external examiner. External examiners continue to have—or it might be more accurate to say, are perceived to have—a key role in safeguarding standards, although the degree to which this remains true is unclear. As Universities UK explained, universities in this country have a "long history of cross-checking the quality and standards of their own provision with that of other institutions through a system of external examiners" and that the involvement of external examiners was "recognised internationally as a key mechanism for ensuring comparability across the UK higher education system".[504] Professor Trainor from Universities UK in his oral evidence called the external examiner system "a jewel in the crown of UK quality maintenance".[505] He explained that the UK had a "double system, double insurance, […] of

502 HC 370–iii, Q 428

503 *Robbins Report*, para 713

504 Ev 439, para 24

505 Q 40

internal scrutiny and external scrutiny, and the two join together in the external examiner system”.[506]

269. We received evidence that indicated that this “jewel in the crown” had become tarnished. One academic in his evidence stated: “External scrutiny is supposed to be provided by the external examiner system, a procedure which is too often abused. External examiners are often friends of the module leaders and are frequently asked to scrutinise subject areas with which they are unfamiliar. They are not encouraged to pass adverse comments.”[507] Another academic wrote in his memorandum:

> The role of the external examiner is, in principle, supposed to be that of a supervisor and guarantor of certain standards of quality and probity. Sadly, this lofty aspiration is met more in the breach than in the observance because of two main factors. In the first place, many universities have succeeded in severely restricting the scope for action by the external examiner by the manner in which they circumscribe his/her duties in the relevant regulations. In many cases, the external examiner does not monitor the general level of the marks [nor] is given the opportunity to change individual grades, since all he/she is called upon to do is to arbitrate between first and second markers and/or make a decision in borderline cases. […]
>
> [T]here is another way in which the external examiner is unable fully to exercise his role as guardian of standards, in that he/she cannot possibly know what has passed between tutor and student prior to the assessment, or the input which the tutor has had in it (in the case of coursework). For it is the worst-kept secret in the academic world that, for unseen examination papers, most tutors provide their students with the contents of the paper beforehand, or at least give them a list of topics from which the questions will be drawn. The role of the external examiner is therefore predicated on an assumption of academic integrity which, for the most part, does not exist.[508]

270. Professor Brown, former Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent University, said that the external examiner system was becoming “outmoded” not only “because of the basic weaknesses in the system” but also because of the growth of multi-disciplinary and modular courses which meant that the external examiner was “not in close contact with the student on a piece of work, which was the original rationale for the system. But then on top of that you have these forces of competition which inevitably will make people cut corners.”[509] He also commented that there was “no substitute for an independent, impartial expert view of the curriculum from professional academics who know their subject and that is the gap in our arrangements at the moment and that is what needs to be done”.[510]

271. In 1997, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (“the Dearing Report”) recommended that the sector “create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions must

506 Q 40

507 Ev 187 (Mr Royle), para 3.9

508 Ev 538 (Mr Cairns), paras 10–11

509 Q 417

510 Q 423 (Professor Brown)

select external examiners".[511] As far as we are aware this recommendation has never been implemented and in the years since the Dearing Report we cannot see that higher education institutions have done much to safeguard or improve the external examiner system. The evidence we received showed that far from being the jewel in the crown that Universities UK claimed it was, it appeared that system might be simultaneously wilting and rotting from within as it has become exposed to the pressures and heat of sector-wide changes, internal pressures and external demands. In our view, if matters continue as they have been the system of external examiners will become outmoded. Whilst it had value in the past in guaranteeing, as Professor Brown put it, that "anyone who takes a British degree is getting a worthwhile qualification with a worthwhile curriculum",[512] we believe that it will be unable to continue to provide an assurance of quality unless the independence, rigour and consistency of the system is reinvigorated and enhanced.

272. From the evidence that we received we would say that the problems of the external examiner system at present can be summarised as:

- the remit and autonomy of external examiners is often unclear and may sometimes differ substantially across institutions in terms of operational practices;
- the reports produced by external examiners are often insufficiently rigorous and critical;
- the external examiner's report's recommendations are often not acted upon—partly because their remit is unclear; and
- the appointment of external examiners is generally not transparent.

273. Notwithstanding these deficiencies, we agree with Universities UK that the external examiner system is fundamental to ensuring high and comparable standards across the sector and that is why we believe that it is worth making the effort to refurbish the system. **The starting point for the repair of the external examiner system is the recommendation made by the Dearing Report to the Quality Assurance Agency "to work with universities and other degree awarding institutions to create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions must select external examiners". We conclude that the sector should now implement this recommendation. Drawing on the evidence we received we would add that the reformed QAA should be given the responsibility of ensuring that the system of external examiners works and that, to enable comparability, the QAA should ensure that standards are applied consistently across institutions. We strongly support the development of a national "remit" for external examiners, clarifying, for example, what documents external examiners should be able to access, the extent to which they can amend marks—in our view, they should have wide discretion—and the matters on which they can comment. This should be underpinned with an enhanced system of training, which would allow examiners to develop the generic skills necessary for multi-disciplinary courses. We conclude that higher education institutions should only employ external examiners from the national pool. The system should also be**

511 *Dearing Report*, recommendation 25

512 Q 417

transparent and we conclude that, to assist current and prospective students, external examiners' reports should be published without redaction, other than to remove material which could be used to identify an individual's mark or performance.

Plagiarism

274. In its memorandum ASKe[513] commented that plagiarism was a problem and that "concern about student plagiarism is an even greater problem". ASKe reported that:

> There is evidence to show it is rising, and in particular, that deliberate attempts to deceive assessors are rising sharply from a relatively low base of (a generally agreed assumed level of) 10–15 cases per 1000 submissions. Statistics about levels of plagiarism are contradictory and hard to evaluate as they ask very different questions of different groups of students. Surveys that show "almost all students cheat" are frequent but irrelevant since they usually refer to one-off or pragmatic decisions with little or no impact on students' overall skills/learning or on the credibility of their final award. […] There is much useless scaremongering in this area, implying that UK graduates are not reliably assessed on discipline specific skills.
>
> The opportunities for plagiarism have risen exponentially since 2003, both in terms of available internet resources and via bespoke writing "services" […] It is estimated that the latter are available via more than 250 sites in the UK alone. In 2005, the Guardian stated such "services" attracted spending of more than 200 million pounds per year. These opportunities and evidence of their use do now present a threat to generic, coursework-assessed courses. Copying and faking work is likely to be a regular practice in large, generic courses in some disciplines. Business, Computing and Law are most often mentioned though concern in all disciplines is widespread. In some cases, studies show up to 50 per cent of students say they submit others' work, at least for some of the assessment, in large, generic courses assessed by coursework. […]
>
> Simplistic reactions to the problems of plagiarism, like a retreat to exams or reliance on technology are not the solution. Addressing plagiarism is well within the capacity of university pedagogic and administrative processes and there are examples of it being handled with creativity and good effect across the UK. There are also many examples of universities who have yet to address the issue systematically and in those cases, a significant issue remains.[514]

275. A number of academics commented in their written submissions on plagiarism as part of a decline in academic standards. For example:

> In the time I have been teaching I have witnessed a remarkable decline in academic standards. At many institutions, grades have been inflated, plagiarism is often ignored.[515]

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513 Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange

514 Ev 196, para 3.6; see also Ev 193, para 18; Ev 232, para 22; and Ev 258, para 8.

515 Ev 187 (Mr Royle), para 3.1

> The University strategies to identify plagiarism were inadequate and the procedures available to combat plagiarism were ineffective. I repeatedly tried to have my concerns about excessive toleration of plagiarism considered by the University. However, I was constantly put off by the University Management. All my complaints were ignored despite a litany of requests for action and no penalties were sanctioned when plagiarism was suspected and detected.[516]

276. When she gave evidence to us Dr Fenton, an academic, said:

> I am in charge of all plagiarism cases in our department. I reckon 10 to 20 per cent of all assignments are plagiarised. We do offer extensive advice on what plagiarism is and how to avoid it to all students at all levels through all course handbooks, and they have to sign bits of paper when they hand work in saying they understand those criteria and they have not plagiarised. We ask for electronic copies of all assessments handed in and they are put through plagiarism detection software. If, at the point of marking, they are suspected of plagiarism then they are put through the software and then we pick them up. We probably pick up about 2 per cent of what I imagine is 10 to 20 per cent.[517]

At the same session another academic, Dr Reid, added that his experience was

> certainly plagiarism levels have increased, but on the science side it is perhaps a slightly different problem than having a big pile of essays; we are often in a situation where there are right answers and wrong answers and it is very easy to distinguish between the two, and it is sometimes difficult to understand how a student has arrived at the right solution and whether they have done that independently or in a group. I have had very nasty plagiarism cases in my department to deal with; I am Director of Learning and Teaching and I have overall responsibility for those issues. Almost invariably, the student's excuse was pressure of time, the deadline coming up and they had to work 17 hours that week to pay the rent, and really regretted doing it but in a moment of weakness took a piece of work from somebody else, and handed the same thing in. It is devastating.[518]

277. The evidence we received from students showed us that they were aware of plagiarism and significantly they told us of the steps that the sector was taking to combat the problem. Ed Steward, a student explained:

> you have huge amounts of guidance on plagiarism. In every single book that you are given there is guidance on plagiarism, it is given out on separate sheets, it is sent out before you even arrive at university, it is on the website, it is absolutely everywhere because it is so crucial that you understand plagiarism in order not to commit it. I sit on some disciplinaries for students who have been accused of plagiarism and the two types of students that I see are those that panic and have not done the work, and plagiarise in order just to submit the work on time, and those who genuinely do not understand that they have plagiarised. It can be as simple as referencing, not putting

516 Ev 501 (Professor El-Sayed), para 4.1

517 Q 446

518 Q 449

> things in quotation marks; that counts as plagiarism, so the university is keen to ensure that every student fully understands every aspect of plagiarism.[519]

278. There was, however, some evidence of variation in the level of vigilance against plagiarism within the sector. Ricky Chotai, a student, considered that not "enough emphasis is put on the structure, do we use the Harvard system [of referencing], and then some academics are also somewhat lax—as long as you are putting references down and as long as it is not the strict system—other academics are very strict as in you must use a specific system."[520] He also said that in his university that "we have seen an increasing trend in plagiarism […] with international students and where […] the university is using agencies to recruit students from abroad […] they are just not explaining about plagiarism".[521] Mr Chotai added that "we have had some really shocking cases of a lot of students in a single class plagiarising and being simply unaware of it."[522]

279. From the limited evidence we received it is clear that plagiarism by students is a serious problem and challenge but one that the higher education sector in general is both aware of, and, the higher education sector claims, actively responding to. There is, however, no room for complacency. Since 2003 the opportunities for plagiarism have risen exponentially, both in terms of material available on the Internet and, apparently, by the development of a market in so-called writing services for students. **We conclude that the growth in opportunities for plagiarism is such that the sector needs to be especially vigilant, establish the application of consistent approaches across the sector and ensure that it fully shares intelligence. We recognise that many students accused of plagiarism may be guilty of little more than failing to reference sources correctly and that the majority of students are conscientious and act in good faith. Given, however, the scale and potential for damage to the reputation of English universities it is vital that the problem is held in check and then progressively "educated" and "managed" out of the system. We recommend that the Government, in consultation with the higher education sector including students' representatives, put in place arrangements to establish standards, which set out what is and what is not plagiarism, ensure that comprehensive guidance is available across the sector, and co-ordinate action to combat plagiarism. One possible candidate for this work is the Higher Education Academy working with the reformed QAA. We also request that the Government, in responding to this Report, advise whether those providing or using so-called "writing services", to produce work which students can misrepresent as their own, are liable for criminal prosecution.**

519 HC 370–iii, Q 441 (Mr Steward); see also Q 450.

520 HC 370–iii, Q 452

521 HC 370–iii, Q 445

522 HC 370–iii, Q 445 (Mr Chotai)

6 Manchester Metropolitan University

Walter Cairns

280. We explain at paragraph 231 that we received a number of submissions from academics alleging that their attempts to raise concerns about standards had been suppressed by their university authorities and that we decided not to investigate or become involved in individual cases in this inquiry. There was one exception. It concerned Walter Cairns, Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University. **In this chapter we set out the circumstances of the case concerning Mr Cairns and Manchester Metropolitan University and our conclusions, which are for the House.**

281. In December 2008 Mr Cairns made a written submission to our inquiry. He contended that there had been a reduction in standards in the assessment of students' work. He said that the reason for the reduction related to the need to retain student numbers "because […] high failure rates would have dire economic consequences for the institution in general and probably for the individual tutors in particular". He alleged that the safeguards in place to protect standards, in the shape of internal and external second assessment, were inadequate for the purpose of countering this trend. Mr Cairns illustrated what he called "this sorry state of affairs" with a case study "based upon his own experience in organising, teaching and assessing various law courses on the International Business degree" at Manchester Metropolitan University.[523]

282. As with the other evidence we received, we published it on the Internet in February 2009, though in this case it was subject to slight excisions, agreed with Mr Cairns, to remove identification of individuals against whom criticisms were made.[524] Following publication of the submission on the Internet, *The Times Higher*[525] and the *Manchester Evening News*[526] published articles drawing on it on 5 and 16 March respectively.

283. The Academic Board of the University,[527] of which Mr Cairns was a member, met on 18 March and during the meeting Mr Cairns was removed from membership of the Board. Mr Cairns immediately contacted the Chairman by e-mail stating that the Board had passed a motion of no-confidence in him as a member of that Board, "thereby causing me to be expelled. The reason for this was my submission to the IUSS enquiry into Students and Universities".[528] Mr Cairns was asked to supply details of what had happened,[529] which he did on 23 March. He explained that:

523 Ev 537

524 Ev 537-40

525 "Claims that academic standards are slipping have been submitted to an inquiry on…", *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 5 March 2009

526 "Students given extra marks", *Manchester Evening News*, 16 March 2009

527 The Academic Board advises the Vice-Chancellor on matters relating to the awarding of degrees.

528 Ev 540 [E-mail 18 March 2009]

529 Ev 540 [E-mail 20 March 2009]

> The question of the Select Committee submissions made by Susan Evans[530] and myself arose during the Vice-Chancellor's Report (Agenda item 3). He expressed his disquiet and disappointment, repeated the disgraceful slur that the contentious mark increase for International Business Law was largely due to the poor standard of my teaching, and invited comments.
>
> [After a discussion the] Vice Chancellor then said: "These contributions fully confirm my own views on the subject. I therefore propose a vote of no-confidence in Mr. Cairns which, if it succeeds, will cause him to leave this Board". The motion was duly seconded, the members of the Board (with one exception) duly raised their hands, and I was asked to leave—which I did.[531]

284. We were concerned that Mr Cairns had in practice been expelled from the Academic Board not because of purely internal issues within the University, which are no concern of ours, but because of the evidence he had given this Committee. The rules of the House of Commons are that molestation of, or threats against, those who have given evidence before the House or a committee may be treated by the House as a contempt.[532] Having consulted the Committee about Mr Cairns' e-mail, the Chairman wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University, Professor John Brooks, on 26 March seeking the University's account of events.[533] The Vice-Chancellor replied on 3 April and, as Chair of the Academic Board, he expressed "regret for the fact that our action may have been perceived as punishing Mr Cairns who, we now appreciate, enjoys certain privileges as a result of acceptance by [the Committee] of the evidence he submitted".[534] The letter concluded:

> If the Committee consider that the Academic Board has violated the privilege enjoyed by Mr Cairns, and you consider that we may be at risk of being in contempt of the House as a consequence of the Academic Board decision, I am willing to reconvene the Board to reconsider the issue.
>
> I would be grateful for your view as to the appropriateness and efficiency of this course of action.[535]

285. In view of the question the Vice-Chancellor posed about reconvening the Board for the purpose, as it appeared, of reconsidering the expulsion, the Second Clerk of the Committee wrote to the Vice-Chancellor on 17 April.[536] A holding letter was sent to Mr Cairns. No reply had been received from the Vice-Chancellor when we considered the matter at our meeting on 6 May. Our preliminary view was that *prima facie* the removal of Mr Cairns from the Academic Board of the University may have been a contempt, which

530 An academic at Manchester Metropolitan University who submitted evidence to the inquiry, see Ev 545 [Susan Evans], and who subsequently made a criticism to us about Manchester Metropolitan University's behaviour, see para 295 ff.

531 Ev 540-41 [E-mail 23 March 2009]

532 *Erskine May Parliamentary Practice*, 23rd Edition, pp 78, 128 and 150

533 Ev 541 [Letter 26 March 2009]

534 Ev 541 [Letter 3 April 2009]

535 Ev 542 [Letter 3 April 2009]

536 Ev 543 [Letter 17 April 2009]

should be referred to the Standards and Privileges Committee of the House. But before reaching a final view we asked the Chairman to write to the University, to clarify whether the Academic Board was going to review its decision to expel Mr Cairns.[537] The Vice-Chancellor replied on 20 May.[538] We sought Mr Cairns' views,[539] which he supplied by e-mail on 21 May.[540]

286. In considering Mr Cairns' allegation we were mindful of a recent precedent concerning the protection of a witness who gave evidence to the Constitutional Affairs Committee in 2003.[541] Our job is not to reach a decision on whether a breach of privilege has taken place: that is primarily for the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Instead, our job is to form a view on whether *prima facie* a breach of privilege may have taken place and, where we come to the view that the test is met, whether to advise the House to refer the matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

287. The key issue for us is whether the actions of the Academic Board in expelling Mr Cairns resulted from the publication of his evidence to us. In its letter of 3 April the University put two main arguments against the allegation of breach of privilege. First, it pointed out that there had been a long-standing dispute between Mr Cairns and the authorities at the University and that Mr Cairns had "failed to engage in the Academic Board processes (or other processes, which include a whistle-blowing procedure) and to accept their outcomes".[542] Second, the University argued that Mr Cairns in speaking to the press went "beyond that which the Select Committee has published as evidence".[543]

288. Mr Cairns made a submission to the inquiry which we found relevant, useful and informative. It is essential for Parliament and its committees to take evidence from witnesses without interference or threat. The University has not sought to argue that the Academic Board at its meeting on 18 March was unaware of the evidence submitted to us by Mr Cairns. In his letter of 3 April the Vice-Chancellor said that, although members of the Academic Board "were not provided with a copy of the submission to the Select Committee", members "were aware of the issues and of the views expressed in numerous press articles by Mr Cairns". He explained that it was "publication of these views that caused serious concern" to members of the Board "as only one side of a complex story was being presented, in a way that courted negative publicity".[544] It seems to us that the Vice-Chancellor and members of the Academic Board were aware of his evidence as reported in the press, particularly the pieces in *The Times Higher* and the *Manchester Evening News*, the latter published only two days before the Board meeting, and that there are grounds for concluding that this may have been the main stimulus from removing Mr Cairns from the

537 Ev 543 [Letter 7 May 2009]

538 Ev 544 [Letter 20 May 2009]

539 Ev 544 [E-mail 21 May 2009]

540 Ev 544 [E-mail 21 May 2009]

541 First Special Report from the Constitutional Affairs Committee, Session 2003–04, *Protection of a witness – privilege*, HC 210; and see also Fifth Report of Session from the Standards and Privileges Committee, Session 2003–04, *Privilege: Protection of Witness*, HC 447.

542 Ev 541 [Letter 3 April 2009]

543 *As above*

544 Ev 542 [Letter 3 April 2009]

Board on 18 March. **The correct course for the University, if it had wished to challenge Mr Cairns' evidence, was to submit its own memorandum to the inquiry.**

289. Turning to the University's second point, we note that the quotations attributed to Mr Cairns in both articles do not appear in the evidence we published. He has not indicated whether or not he spoke to the press but in view of the quotations we consider that there are grounds for concluding that he may have spoken to the press. In this case, however, the gist of the two newspaper reports appear to us to be based on the written evidence as published on the Internet. The main allegations—the 85% failure rate in the law examination, the assessment of the second examiner, the addition of 20 marks, the behaviour and qualifications of the external examiner and the actions of the University—are set out clearly in the published evidence. It appears to us that the articles in *The Times Higher* and the *Manchester Evening News* were built squarely on the published evidence and were reasonably accurate accounts of the evidence. We consider that any additional material—irrespective of where it came from—was not on its own such that it could be reasonably held to have led the University to take the action it did on 18 March.

290. We must add that we have concerns about the process adopted by the Vice-Chancellor and the Academic Board on 18 March. The Vice-Chancellor in his response to the Committee has not challenged Mr Cairns' account of the meeting. We are surprised and concerned that the Vice-Chancellor and the Board appear to have expelled Mr Cairns without affording him the right to respond to the allegations made. Mr Cairns, who is a lawyer and, by his action in contacting the Chairman following the events on 18 March, appears to have knowledge of the operation of parliamentary privilege, might have been in a position to warn the Board of the consequences of its actions. In the event the Board appears to have denied him a voice and as a result lost the possibility of obtaining advice on the implications of the course that it was taking.

291. **In our view the action of the Vice-Chancellor and the Academic Board of Manchester Metropolitan University on 18 March 2009 in removing Mr Cairns from the Board could be regarded as interference with a witness and therefore a *prima facie* breach of privilege. If matters had remained there we would have consulted the Liaison Committee and requested the House to refer the matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.**

292. In his reply to the Chairman's letter of 7 May asking whether the Academic Board was going to review its decision to expel Mr Cairns[545] the Vice-Chancellor in his letter of 20 May advised us that:

> Mr Cairns term of office on Academic Board completed at the end of this session. The process to re-appoint for the new session has now been completed and Mr Cairns will be appointed for a further term of office. I hope that the Select Committee feels that this addresses any issues of contempt that may have unintentionally occurred.[546]

545 Ev 543 [Letter 7 May 2009]

546 Ev 544 [Letter 20 May 2009]

293. We sought Mr Cairns' views,[547] which he supplied by e-mail on 21 May. He said that:

> I have been elected by my Faculty to serve for a new two-year term on the Academic Board. I would, however, add the following:
>
> (a) this in no way alters the unacceptable manner in which I was humiliated and given no right to reply to all the lies and distortions cast in my direction at the Academic Board meeting of 18 March, some of which were defamatory in the extreme;
>
> (b) my Faculty has remained unrepresented for two consecutive Board meetings, since the University did not even organise a by-election;
>
> (c) there is no guarantee whatsoever that the Vice-Chancellor will not repeat his little trick at any future meeting of the AB at which I am present.[548]

294. **We found the decision whether to ask the House to refer the University's actions to the Committee on Standards and Privileges a very finely balanced one. In the end because the University has expressed regrets—albeit with reservations—and because Mr Cairns has rejoined the Academic Board, we have concluded that, while it is right to bring this serious matter to the attention of the House in this Report, in the circumstances we should not ask the House to refer the matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. We must, however, put on record that we deprecate the behaviour of the Vice-Chancellor and the members of the Academic Board of Manchester Metropolitan University not only for removing Mr Cairns from the Board on 18 March 2009, particularly as it appears without giving Mr Cairns the opportunity to respond, but also for the manner in which they have handled the matter since the events of 18 March. Having accepted that they made an error, the Vice-Chancellor and Academic Board should simply have accepted the consequence of their mistake, apologised and speedily restored Mr Cairns.**

Susan Evans

295. On 2 June 2009 Ms Susan Evans, Lecturer in Economics at Manchester Metropolitan University, wrote to the Chairman of the Committee raising the response of her employer when information from her submission was published in the press. She said:

> In an article in the Sunday Times (8 March 2009)[549] that included information from my submission, the reported response from Manchester Metropolitan University was "We are extremely disappointed that a colleague has chosen to raise these issues externally".

547 Ev 544 [E-mail 21 May 2009]

548 *As above*

549 "Lecturers reveal watered-down degrees; Academics are breaking ranks to expose a grim picture of higher education, says Jack Grimston", *Sunday Times*, 8 March 2009

> A similar response was reported in an article again concerning my submission that was published in the THE, 19–25 March 2009 edition.[550] […] Since a Parliamentary Committee requested the information, I would like to know how it is acceptable that a public sector employer responds in this way.
>
> If this is an acceptable response are people in future going to provide evidence, when so requested, to a Parliamentary Committee?
>
> I hope the Select Committee will raise this matter with the management of Manchester Metropolitan University.[551]

296. The quotation attributed by the Sunday Times to a spokeswoman for the University was as follows:

> Miss Evans expresses a lot of very personal views but presents very little objective information.
>
> There is no evidence staff are put under any pressure to bump up grades. We are extremely disappointed and upset that a colleague has chosen to raise these issues externally.[552]

297. In the case of Ms Evans we take the view that the University's action in making the statement to the press does not on this occasion constitute a threat or significant interference with the witness. We have therefore not raised the matter with the University ahead of the publication of this Report. **We make it clear to Manchester Metropolitan University and to the higher education institutions in general that putting obstacles in the way of, or seeking to discourage through criticism, those who put evidence to Parliament or its committees are matters that we deprecate. We reiterate that the correct course for the University, if it had wished to challenge Ms Evans' evidence, was to submit its own memorandum to the inquiry.**

550 "Lecturers hit back at efforts to discredit grade-inflation claims", *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 19 March 2009

551 Ev 551

552 "Lecturers reveal watered-down degrees; Academics are breaking ranks to expose a grim picture of higher education, says Jack Grimston", *Sunday Times*, 8 March 2009

7 Conclusion

Views of students

298. This inquiry has been about student engagement and the student experience of university. Detailed below are some of the answers given when we asked students what for them makes for a good, or bad, university experience.

- I […] have had a very positive experience within university because of the excellent teaching and support that I have received.[553]
- For me the main one would have to be the high standard of teaching, which is good value for the tuition fees we are paying for our course. There's nothing more frustrating when you go to a lecture and you have a lecturer just reading Powerpoint slides, especially when they are available at other sources like on the internet and the virtual learning environments we have as well.[554]
- What I consider to be a good university experience is a place where you can go to learn, where you feel supported by the staff within it. So it doesn't matter if you've got all the modern facilities and all the best teachers.[555]
- If I were to use one phrase to encapsulate which makes or breaks a student experience it would be getting involved. The endless opportunities available at university are wasted if students are not properly encouraged to embrace them and push themselves.[556]
- What I think makes a good university experience is a clear and defined career path. Myself personally, I've been working for many years. I come from a single parent background and it's a career change, so my reason for going to university is because I just want a whole new changing career.[557]
- What contributes to a successful university experience is an institution which actively seeks values and acts on student feedback.[558]
- For me the students' union were the good guys at the university. They kept me going. They showed me the extra-curricula activities I could do. I didn't enjoy my course in the first year. I really wanted to leave, but it was the extra-curricula activities.[559]
- Where parents can afford to meet the cost of living students gain better degrees; where parents can't afford it, their children's job prospects are damaged. When debts are so high and repayment takes so long many poorer students may decide to avoid university

553 Q 184 (Ms Donaghy)

554 Q 187 (Mr Chotai)

555 Q 225 (Ms Davidson)

556 Q 186 (Ms Hopkins)

557 Q 231 (Mr Harris)

558 Q 228 (Mr Pollard)

559 Q 229 (Mr Topazio)

due to its cost, especially at the moment. University is too expensive and there are not enough grants offered to poorer students.[560]

- Within the current job market it is important that universities do prepare their students for jobs as not only are students now competing for jobs but many experienced people are losing their jobs, meaning that graduates are up against those who have a lot more experience.[561]

The higher education sector

299. When we were in the USA we asked an academic with extensive experience of European and American higher education for his views on the British system of higher education and how it compared with the system in the USA. He said that the best of the British was better than the best of the American but added that the British system was hampered by an "inherited elitism", an interesting assertion. While we now have a mass higher education system in England, much of the ethos and operation of the sector has been influenced by the research intensive universities in the 1994 and Russell Groups. Is this sustainable in the face of a government objective to have 40% of all adults in England gaining a university qualification by 2020?

300. One clear example of the weight of history lying heavily on the sector is the boundary of institutional autonomy and a reluctance in parts of the sector to develop greater openness on terms other than those which they have determined. We found one example where autonomy and lack of transparency appeared to have led to a serious deficiency—statistically flawed methods of assessments used for degree classifications. **We conclude that one of the challenges the higher education sector faces over the next decade is to develop greater openness and transparency in relation to, for example, academic standards, external examiners and the safeguarding of the student experience.**

Higher education compact

301. We consider that an essential first step towards greater transparency is to define the roles and responsibilities of the higher education sector—academics, managers and students—and of the government with regard to higher education. We concluded in chapter 5 that all would benefit if their roles and responsibilities were set out in a concordat. It could, for example, define the nature of both individual academic freedom and institutional academic autonomy, the principles applying to the consideration of applications for admissions and, more specifically, that only assessments meeting acceptable statistical practice will be applied to the marking of students' work (see paragraph 257 and following).

560 Q 185 (Mr Williamson)

561 Q 184 (Ms Donaghy)

Student compacts

302. We envisage that as part of the concordat there should be a general agreement that each higher education institution would produce, in consultation with its students, a student compact. Such compacts could cover the following:

- for prospective undergraduate students an indication, by faculty or department, of the number and duration of lectures, seminars and tutorials with an indication of (a) the likely size of groups attending lectures, seminar groups and tutorials—for example, based on the previous year's experience, or the average in the department—and (b) the amount of teaching that will be carried out by named academic staff and by graduate students;

- information regarding academic staff who will be available in a given year to guide students outside formal lectures and seminars;

- a commitment to return work assignments to students within a certain period and provide detailed feedback; and

- in return each higher education institution should be able to set out what is expected of students, how many assignments they will be expected to submit, and how much time they will be expected to devote to private study.

Codes of practice on admissions and access information

303. It also appears to us that institutional autonomy can get in the way of cross-sector arrangements that are clearly to the advantage of students and prospective students. First, the operation of, and principles underpinning, admissions arrangements need to be fully explained by all higher education institutions to enable applicants to know how and against what criteria they will be assessed. We call for a code of practice on admissions to higher education. Second, we see clear advantages for students if higher education institutions present information in a consistent format such as that which we suggest for inclusion in the student compacts. So we also call for a code of practice on information for prospective students.

Evidence for the formulation of policy

304. We found a paradox in this inquiry. The higher education sector in England carries out, and has a reputation for, world-class research (and often world class teaching) but there was a dearth of research, especially applied research, into key areas that should inform policy formulation on higher education policy itself in England—for example, on the influences stimulating the growth in numbers of degrees classified as firsts or upper seconds, the relationship between teaching and research or the variation in students' hours of study between institutions. As we note in the body of the Report, there appears to be little appetite for such research, which we find disappointing. **We are concerned that the higher education sector's lack of interest in research into parts of its own operation might be seen as a symptom of complacency and a reluctance to test and challenge assumptions, some of which in an increasingly global market for higher education may**

be outmoded. We see a role for Government here to identify, commission and publicise research on the operation of the higher education sector in England.

Standards

305. We were especially struck by the lack of clarity—and sometimes we even detected an element of irritation—when we asked Vice-Chancellors whether a degree from a research intensive university in the 1994 or Russell Groups was the same as one from a university established after 1992. Their responses were in marked contrast to those we received in the USA. The American Council on Education said there was no doubt that degrees varied between universities and between departments within a university and added that there was no question that the prestige of the Ivy League and top universities was greatest. Whether it likes the question or not, the higher education sector in this country is going to have to explain whether first class honours degrees from different universities are equivalent. **It is unacceptable for the sector to be in receipt of departmental spending of £15 billion but be unable to answer a straightforward question about the relative standards of the degrees of the students, which the taxpayer has paid for.**

Quality and standards agency

306. In reviewing the evidence in our inquiry, we found that the arrangements for safeguarding standards need to be brought up-to-date. The arrangements that served us well during the 19th and 20th centuries are now in danger of failing under the weight of a higher education sector in England with 133 diverse institutions and where the total number of higher education students has increased in England by from 1.5 million in 1996–97 to 1.9 million in 2007–08.[562] Without the glue of common, clearly understood and consistently applied standards there is a risk that the sector could fragment further. If it does and if it follows the pattern of the USA, what is likely to happen is that the sector fragments and a hierarchy emerges—described to us by an American academic—as based on: the price an institute can charge in fees; the institution's position in league tables; a selectivity of students that may not be as sensitive to fair access and widening participation as the current arrangements; and value for money. We have no problem with a hierarchy of universities but what we do care about is that any such hierarchy should be based on excellence of teaching, scholarship and research, not exclusively on money.

307. **We are clear that the sector needs to address the question of standards now. We have called for a new quality and standards agency, answerable jointly to higher education institutions and the Government, and reporting annually to Parliament. We envisage that such a body, expanding significantly from the work that the Quality Assurance Agency has done, will build and rejuvenate the limbs of the existing system that until relatively recently was working well—in particular, the system of external examiners—and to provide the best way to safeguard the integrity of standards in English higher education institutions.**

308. **It will also naturally be part of such a development that the relationship between this new agency and the Higher Education Academy be reviewed, including**

562 See table at para 3.

clarification of the key responsibility for quality enhancement in regard to the student experience. Although we had reservations about the operation of the Academy, it could and, we believe, should have a key role in promoting and enhancing academic standards.

309. **The key to the successful transformation of higher education in England in the next decade will be to move away from a culture fixated on the most prestigious research-intensive universities and the results of the Research Assessment Exercise (and its replacement) to one where other models of study and university can thrive and excellence is recognised and rewarded for teaching supported by scholarship.**

Conclusions and recommendations

Framework for higher education

1. We support the approach of the former Secretary of State, John Denham, in examining the function and structure of higher education ahead of reaching decisions on funding. We regret, however, that the Government did not initiate and complete the examination of the function and structure of higher education in time to allow the review of fees to be completed in 2009 and therefore ensure the matter is fully aired in the run up to the next General Election. (Paragraph 9)

2. We recommend that in responding to this Report the Government set out a detailed timetable for publishing the higher education framework. (Paragraph 10)

Future scrutiny of higher education

3. Two areas our successor committee might find rewarding to examine are: international students and postgraduate students, including those studying for masters degrees and also including the terms under which universities require postgraduate students to teach undergraduates. We have deliberately kept our focus on the undergraduate. (Paragraph 11)

Demand for places in higher education institutions in 2009

4. We recommend that in responding to this Report the Government provide a detailed breakdown of the 4,805 full-time places (Additional Student Numbers) announced in October 2008, in particular how 1,800 ASNs were required for year two and three students. (Paragraph 14)

5. We recommend that in making future statements about the provision of additional places in higher education the Government provide a breakdown between full-time and part-time places and state clearly how many of the additional places will be available for new entrant, first-year undergraduates. (Paragraph 17)

6. We did not have the opportunity to take evidence on the Government's Written Ministerial Statement made in July 2009. While we welcome a potential increase in student numbers, these measures do not appear to meet all our concerns and have the potential to set an unfortunate precedent in that no additional teaching grant is being made available, particularly for science subjects where the costs are higher. Moreover, in our view, the pressure caused by the strong increase in demand for places in higher education in 2009 may still require the attention of our successor committee later in the year, after this year's A-level results are published, and we therefore flag this up as an issue for our successor committee. (Paragraph 18)

7. We therefore welcome that part of the Written Ministerial Statement which states that the "Government will pay the student support costs for extra places in courses" related to the agenda set out in the policy statement "Building Britain's Future—New Industry, New Jobs" (20 April 2009) such as science, technology, engineering and

maths. We agree that new places in higher education should meet the strategic needs of the country for STEM graduates, subject to our concerns in the previous paragraph. (Paragraph 19)

8. We highlight the provision and education of STEM graduates as an issue for our successor committee, and also it may be an issue that we examine as part of our revised remit of scrutinising science and technology across government. (Paragraph 20)

Balance of funding

9. The apparent disparity of funding in favour of young full-time students raises questions about the justification of the balance of the allocation of resources in higher education funding between young full-time, young part-time, mature full-time and mature part-time students. The allocation of resources between these groups and the broader question of a single funding stream for higher education and further education are matters that our successor committee with responsibility for both further and higher education may wish to examine. (Paragraph 37)

The use and application of contextual factors

10. We commend the University of Leeds for its programme of entry for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and conclude that this should be standard practice across the sector. In our view this practice will require higher education institutions to develop programmes for entry, which take account of contextual factors giving a discount on A-level requirements, to ensure fair access. (Paragraph 47)

11. We recommend that the Government require higher education institutions, in receipt of public funds, to take contextual factors into account and to set out which ones it requires higher education institutions to take into account. (Paragraph 48)

12. We recommend that, within the next year, the Government review and report on the extent to which higher education institutions have adopted the findings of the Schwartz Review on Admission to Higher Education. The review also needs to examine the extent to which contextual factors are applied consistently across the sector. We also recommend that the Government put in place arrangements to monitor the consequences of the use of contextual factors on measures such as completion rates. (Paragraph 48)

Code of practice on admissions

13. In our view the principle of fair access to higher education is the paramount principle that must govern admissions and we have no reservation in stating that it overrides other standard assumptions of the sector such as institutional autonomy. In our view it is unacceptable for any part of the higher education sector to cite higher education institutional autonomy as a reason to sidestep the requirement to ensure fair access. (Paragraph 49)

14. We consider that there is a role for government working with the higher education sector to agree a set of principles that apply to the admission process, which should be promulgated as a code of practice on admissions to higher education across institutions. We stress that we are not calling for a common admissions process or for government to specify the actual admissions and selection rules, but, given the diversity of higher education institutions, we conclude that the sector should have arrangements that reduce the elements of randomness and chance in the system and help ensure students to get a fairer deal. (Paragraph 51)

15. We consider that where universities agree to recognise each other's students—either applicants who have met their admission criteria, including those who have earned a discount on the usual entrance requirements, or students who have earned credits—such an approach could make a significant contribution to credit transfer and portability for students wishing or needing to transfer between higher education institutions and in expanding both participation and diversity in the student body. We recommend that the Government require those higher education institutions in receipt of public funds to enter mutual recognition agreements and for the terms of all agreements to be published. (Paragraph 52)

Fair access to universities in the Russell Group and 1994 Group

16. We consider that fair access must be seen as important by the whole higher education sector, particularly those higher education institutions that historically have generated the highest lifetime earnings and most social capital for their graduates. (Paragraph 56)

Widening participation

17. It appears that not only are levels of attainment between state and independent schools diverging at Level 3 but also large numbers of able young people are not studying to Level 3, the main entrance gate to benefit from higher education. (Paragraph 61)

18. We recommend that the Government carry out, before the next Spending Review, a full review of the provision of education at Level 3, including the Qualifications Framework and all routes into higher education, to ensure that those who have the ability to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. (Paragraph 62)

19. We recommend that the review include an examination of expanding higher education provided in further education colleges, to assist those who currently could, but do not, go forward into higher education. (Paragraph 63)

Benchmarks

20. We conclude that the performance indicators which the Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes on the composition of students from under-represented groups in individual higher education institutions provide a useful focus for the higher education sector on widening participation and should continue to be published annually. We consider, however, that benchmarks should not be used as targets and that failure to meet benchmarks should not be used to criticise higher education institutions until they are better developed to discount all confounding factors. (Paragraph 68)

Schools and further education colleges

21. We welcome the outreach to local schools and colleges that many universities undertake and the growing co-operation between higher education, schools and further education, which has the potential to widening participation in higher education. We encourage all higher education institutions to develop such partnerships. We recommend that the Government put arrangements in place to enhance the co-operation between schools, further education colleges and higher education to facilitate widening participation in higher education. We recommend therefore that the Government and HEFCE urgently examine ways in which both higher education institutions and staff are incentivised to instigate and carry out outreach initiatives. This might, for example, include ring-fenced funding of a relatively modest nature to support widening participation specifically to encourage new outreach initiatives and to recognise the specific contributions of individual lecturers and staff at higher education institutions. (Paragraph 73)

22. We consider that the Government should encourage higher education institutions to pilot initiatives that have potential to increase higher education/school co-operation and facilitate wider participation. (Paragraph 74)

23. We have not examined in detail in this Report the relationship between higher education and further education and this is an issue that our successor committee with responsibility for further education and higher education may wish to consider. (Paragraph 75)

Foundation degrees and foundation years

24. In our view, if the community college credit system model operating in the US were adopted in England, it would provide much greater flexibility in higher education in this country, which will be essential to widening participation. We consider that one route to the introduction of the model is to expand the provision of higher education in further education colleges. We conclude that the Government should accelerate the expansion of higher education provided in further education colleges. (Paragraph 83)

25. When the Government comes to set out its vision for higher education over the next 10–15 years it is essential that it explains how students with the required cognitive abilities but without matching learning skills will be supported and assisted. The Government needs to set out how it wishes to see the current foundation degree arrangements evolve—particularly, how many entrants to higher education it expects to commence with a foundation year and what financial support they can expect. We recommend that the Government take immediate steps to introduce a credit transfer system which will allow credit transfer and portability between tertiary education institutions in England—that is, between further and higher and within higher education institutions. (Paragraph 84)

26. In our view, a prerequisite for a system of credit transfer is a national system that validates quality assurance and the standards of credits earned by students. (Paragraph 85)

Completion of courses

27. We conclude that higher education institutions should both identify and promote good practice—for example, by systematically collecting and rigorously scrutinising their own non-completion data across years and across subjects, carrying out exit interviews and surveys and by developing further their student personal advice and support systems. We also recommend that the Government investigate the reasons why the non-completion rates of part-time students are higher than those for full-time students and bring forward proposals to reduce the rates. (Paragraph 88)

28. We recommend that the Government, when evaluating widening participation, examine student progression as well as numbers. (Paragraph 89)

29. We conclude that one of the main supports to securing wider participation is a comprehensive system of pastoral care and welfare, as well as academic, support for students by each higher education institution. We recommend that the Government place a duty of care on higher education institutions to support their students and require higher education institutions to provide a comprehensive system of pastoral and welfare support for students encompassing, for example, pre-admission courses, adjustment programmes, counselling and mentoring. (Paragraph 90)

Guidance and information

30. In our view, it is essential that the strategic needs of the country for STEM graduates are fully taken into account when the Government sets targets for the expansion of higher education. The Government must counteract any tendency within the system propelling young people to study non-STEM subjects which are perceived to make admission to university easier. As we noted in chapter 1, one step it should take is to ensure that any new places funded in higher education institutions meet the strategic needs of the country for STEM graduates. (Paragraph 95)

31. We conclude that currently careers guidance to those at many secondary schools is inadequate. We consider that careers guidance needs to start at key stage 3 to advise young people about their choice of GCSEs as this determines post-16 choice, including entry into higher education. While we are aware that, following the Government's acceptance of the recommendation of the Leitch Report changes are planned, we consider that the Government needs to overhaul, extend and improve the careers guidance system urgently and to ensure that young people have access to independent and also to specialist advice from industry and academia, including students. When the changes have been made, we recommend that the Government put in place clear procedures for monitoring the quality of careers guidance in

schools and colleges to ensure that the improvement in quality and reach that is required has been achieved. (Paragraph 96)

32. We conclude that it would assist prospective students if higher education institutions presented in a consistent format, which facilitates cross-institutional comparisons, the time a typical undergraduate student could expect to spend in attending lectures and tutorials, in personal study and, for science courses, in laboratories during a week. In addition, universities should indicate the likely size of tutorial groups and the numbers at lectures and the extent to which students may be taught by graduate students. We conclude that the higher education sector should develop a code of practice on information for prospective students setting out the range, quality and level of information that higher education institutions should make available to prospective undergraduate students. (Paragraph 98)

National Student Survey

33. We commend the introduction of the National Student Survey and fully support the concept of seeking the views of students through such a survey. (Paragraph 100)

34. We accept that the National Student Survey is a good starting point but caution against an over-reliance on it. We conclude that it is essential to safeguard the independence of the National Student Survey and recommend that the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which has responsibility for the Survey, examine ways to bolster the independence of the survey, including bringing forward arrangements to provide the NUS with a role in promoting the integrity of the Survey. (Paragraph 101)

35. We conclude that league tables are a permanent fixture and recommend that the Government seek to ensure that as much information is available as possible from bodies such as HEFCE and HESA, to make the data they contain meaningful, accurate and comparable. (Paragraph 104)

36. To assist people applying to higher education we recommend that the Government seek to expand the National Student Survey to incorporate factors which play a significant part in prospective applicants' decisions—for example, the extent to which institutions encourage students to engage in non-curricula activities and work experience and offer careers advice. (Paragraph 104)

37. We recommend that the Government produce a metric to measure higher education institutions' contribution to widening participation, use the metric to measure the contribution made by institutions and publish the results in a form which could be incorporated into university league tables. (Paragraph 105)

Tuition fees and the review of fees

38. We have deliberately not set out to review the question of tuition fees and we make no recommendation as to the level at which variable tuition fees should be capped or whether they should be abolished. Tuition fees came up at several points during our inquiry and we set out below observations which we hope will inform the review of fees. (Paragraph 110)

39. Though we received anecdotal views that some people may have been discouraged from applying to university, we note that the students whom we met or took evidence from were not pressing concerns that fees set at £3,145 across almost all universities were deterring full-time students from applying to university. (Paragraph 111)

40. We detected no evidence that variable tuition fees at current levels were driving up quality on campus, which is not surprising given that the fees hardly vary across the higher education sector and so provide little incentive for students to look for value for money between institutions. We found some concerns that applicants might be deterred if the review of fees led to a steep increase in fees. (Paragraph 113)

41. We recommend that in its consultation on the review of fees the Government seeks to commission and publish independent research to provide for a detailed and informed debate and consultation on the matter, in particular into the impact of a higher cap on course quality and applications. We further recommend that any higher education institution seeking to increase its fees provide detailed evidence to support its proposals. (Paragraph 114)

42. We recommend the Government's review of fees look at the alternative methods of securing the funds needed to sustain a strong higher education sector and should not be concerned exclusively with the appropriate level of fees within the current structure. (Paragraph 116)

43. In our view the student and the level of debt he or she could reasonably be expected to incur has to be a central question for the forthcoming review of fees. (Paragraph 117)

44. We recommend that the Government commission independent research into the effects of the introduction of variable tuition fees introduced in 2006 and into further increases in fees on applications to higher education from those from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. We further recommend that this research be commissioned and published in time to inform the review of fees. As part of the review of fees the Government needs to indicate as part of its vision for higher education over the next 15 years at what level it wants to see tuition fees reach, if it is to persist with the current fee regime. If its objective is to raise the cap on fees significantly towards levels that the market will determine it needs to explain how it will ensure that the deleterious effects we saw in the USA are to be avoided. (Paragraph 120)

Bursaries

45. We conclude that the current bursary arrangements cannot be justified on the grounds of equitably matching student support with student needs. (Paragraph 125)

46. We conclude that the current bursary arrangements, which have led to large variations between higher education institutions in support for students with similar needs, cannot be justified on the grounds of widening participation in higher education. (Paragraph 127)

47. We conclude that the present bursary arrangements do not contribute to the national policies of widening participation or fair access. Nor are they an instrument to maximise the affordability of higher education for students from poor backgrounds, which, in our view, is what student support arrangements should be concerned with. (Paragraph 129)

48. If, following the review of fees, bursaries remain to be set by each institution, we conclude that all higher education institutions must ensure that prospective students are made aware of the bursaries available and can easily establish eligibility and calculate an indicative level of bursary and that at least basic information about a specific institution's approach is provided as part of its pre-admission documentation provided to applicants. (Paragraph 131)

National bursary system

49. The Russell and 1994 Groups put to us their strong belief that all the additional fee income "belongs to" their member institutions and can only be spent on "their" students. This is not, in our view, a principle that is either demonstrable or sustainable. (Paragraph 133)

50. We recommend that the Government include in the terms of reference of the forthcoming review of fees two key guiding principles. First, student need, rather than the characteristics of the university that the student attends, should determine the support that students receive. Second, any arrangements such as bursary arrangements recommended by the review must be shown to contribute to the national policies both of widening participation and fair access. (Paragraph 136)

51. We consider that a national bursary scheme should also enable students to calculate the total level of support they could expect when making applications to higher education institutions. We favour a national bursary scheme, which would set a realistic national minimum bursary for all students across England. We recommend that the Government draw up and publish as part of the review of fees, and invite comments on, a national bursary scheme. We recommend that the indicative scheme set national minimum amounts for bursaries calculated on the basis of need to which all students in higher education institutions in England would be eligible to apply. (Paragraph 137)

52. We acknowledge that a national bursary system that duplicated the existing student grant arrangements may not be the best way to proceed. We consider that, if the Government can show that the principles we have set out above can be effectively met by another route—for example, by a redistributive mechanism pooling a percentage of each higher education institution's fee income and redistributing it as additional grant—then that may be a more sensible way forward. (Paragraph 139)

53. If following the review, fees vary significantly, it is essential that students from poor backgrounds have no financial disincentive from attending high-fee institutions and we conclude that the review of fees should ensure that there are arrangements to provide these students with adequate financial support. Such arrangements could include an addition above the national minimum bursary or a top-up bursary provided by the institution charging the higher fees. (Paragraph 140)

Part-time and mature students

54. In our view, the case for improving the treatment of part-time and mature students is compelling. In equity all students must be treated in the same manner. Any system that does not achieve this will discriminate against groups—in this case part-time and mature students—and this is unacceptable. Nor does it make sense, given the scale of the improvement in education and skills that the Government wants to see by 2020, to deny support to part-time and mature students, who have a crucial part to play in achieving this objective. We recommend that the forthcoming review of fees examine all aspects of support for part-time and mature students, including both the direct financial support to part-time students and the nature of changes required which will enable the sector to develop greater flexibility to meet the needs of part-time students. We further recommend that this assessment set a deadline by which the treatment of, and support for, undergraduate students becomes broadly similar, irrespective of whether students study full-time or part-time. (Paragraph 152)

55. We recommend that the Government review the existing schemes to assist groups into higher education—such as those leaving the armed forces—to establish the lessons that could be applied to assist other groups. (Paragraph 153)

Relationship between teaching and research

56. We consider that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) should take into account the whole range of indicators of excellence, including the broader contribution which academics make. (Paragraph 158)

57. There is one issue that we should highlight and in responding to this Report we invite the Government to explain how the REF will take it into account. This is the treatment of multi-disciplinary collaborative teams between, and within, higher education institutions. We consider that the REF should ensure that sufficient weight is given to such collaborative teams and the effects of such teams are taken into account to ensure that they are encouraged and developed. This is a matter that our successor committee may wish to examine. (Paragraph 159)

58. We recommend that the Government require higher education institutions in receipt of funds from the taxpayer to have accounting systems in place that provide a clear audit trail of the use to which resources provided for teaching and research are put so that they can be separately and clearly identified. (Paragraph 160)

59. Most of the students who responded to our inquiry saw the connection between teaching and research as positive, finding the proximity to research stimulating and the quality of teachers' scholarship enhanced. They also identified some negative effects such as cancelled classes and unavailability of lecturers. We conclude that, where research impacts negatively on teaching, the university authorities should be expected to address the deficiencies. (Paragraph 170)

60. Having examined the material supplied by DIUS we cannot see that convincing evidence is currently available to prove the assertion that good-quality research is essential for good teaching of undergraduates. In our view, the evidence is at best mixed and there may be different relationships between research and teaching not just across disciplines within institutions and even within departments and that across the sector these relationships may range from mutually supportive to antagonistic. We recommend that the Government commission and publish independent research in this area to inform future policy decisions. (Paragraph 172)

61. We consider that the extent to which undergraduates across the higher education sector are expected to carry out research as part of their programme of study and the extent to which those teaching and supervising such students need to be actively engaged in research themselves are both matters that should be addressed in the research which we recommend that the Government commissions. The results of this research may require a significant reassessment of where and how resources are allocated between teaching and research. (Paragraph 173)

62. We invite the Government in responding to this Report to comment on the proposition that one of the indicators of excellence to be taken into account by the Research Excellence Framework will be the demonstrable effect that research and teaching have on each other in institutions, and also the broader contribution which academics submitting to the REF make to pedagogic research and by implication pedagogic practice. (Paragraph 174)

63. We recommend that the Research Excellence Framework explicitly recognises and gives credence to research into pedagogy and the teaching within, and across, disciplines. (Paragraph 176)

64. We consider that the higher education sector needs to be clearer about the circumstances in which promotion and progression can be achieved on the basis of pedagogical skills, scholarship and expertise. We recommend that the Government require higher education institutions in receipt of public funds to ensure that they have put in place clear and effective criteria for appointments and promotions based on teaching. (Paragraph 178)

Higher Education Academy

65. First, if the Higher Education Academy is operating effectively and meeting its strategic aims, we consider that, working with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, it should be able to play a key role in promoting and enhancing academic standards and in driving forward the changes we suggest are needed in this Report. If, however, the Academy is not working effectively we conclude that it will not be able to play its full part in promoting and enhancing academic standards in higher education. (Paragraph 180)

66. We recommend that HEFCE carry out a further evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of the Higher Education Academy by the end of the year and publish the evaluation. The operation and effectiveness of the Academy is an issue that our successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education may wish to examine. (Paragraph 181)

67. We recommend that, whilst taking account of the work of the National Student Forum, as a condition of continued support the Government require the Higher Education Academy to establish its own student forum for the purpose of accessing directly the views and experiences of students, particularly in relation to its own areas of focus. In addition, we recommend that the Government review the operation and use by higher education institutions of the Academy's Professional Standards Framework and we recommend that the Government require the Academy to produce "steering" statements in relation to academic staff development as a means for improving the student experience. (Paragraph 183)

68. We recommend that the Government require the Higher Education Academy as a condition for continued support through HEFCE to develop arrangements to encourage established academic staff to engage in professional development in relation to their teaching responsibilities and to set up systems to record their development. In return for this support from the taxpayer through the Academy we expect higher education institutions to press their staff to continue their professional development. (Paragraph 184)

Teaching qualification and training

69. We conclude that all staff—new entrants, current staff and graduate students—in higher education who teach should be encouraged to obtain a higher education teaching qualification, which, depending on an individual's role and level of experience, should be achieved through initial training or on the basis of continuing professional development. (Paragraph 186)

70. We also recommend that the Government, in consultation with the higher education sector, including student representatives, review the use of graduate students in teaching roles and examine whether additional means of support—such as the development of mentoring arrangements and contracts of appointment—are required. (Paragraph 186)

71. We recommend that the Government in consultation with the higher education sector, including student representatives, draw-up and agree a strategy to require all university staff engaged in regular and significant teaching to undertake appropriate training in pedagogical skills and also to encourage staff across higher education institutions in England to obtain a professional teaching qualification. We further recommend that the Government require higher education institutions as a condition of support from the taxpayer to have in place programmes to enhance the teaching effectiveness of all academic staff who have teaching responsibilities. We recommend that, within its review processes, the QAA monitor and report on the extent to which institutions are demonstrably meeting this requirement. (Paragraph 187)

72. We conclude that the Government and the higher education sector, in consultation with student representatives, should draw up and implement arrangements applicable across the sector which allow students to convey concerns about poor teaching and which ensure that universities take effective remedial action. We consider that such arrangements once established should be subject to review by the Quality Assurance Agency to ensure that they allow students to convey concerns and that remedial action is taken, where warranted. (Paragraph 190)

73. We consider that all academic staff in higher education engaged in regular and significant teaching should be able to demonstrate the incorporation of up-to-date scholarship, research and professional practice into their teaching. (Paragraph 193)

Quality of feedback given by teachers to students

74. Whilst individual institutions may have developed effective institutional or course-based guidance, we conclude that there is a need for a code of practice across the higher education sector, which builds on the QAA's "Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 6: Assessment of students". It is our view that, whether at the level of module, course, department or institution, students should be provided with more personalised information about the intended parameters of their own assessment experience. It is unacceptable and disheartening for any piece of work whether good, average or poor to be returned to a student with only a percentage mark and no comments or with feedback but after such a long time that the feedback is ineffective. We recommend that the Government require the Higher Education Academy to draw up, in consultation with the higher education sector, including representative students, a code of practice on (i) the timing, (ii) the quantity, and (iii) the format and content of feedback and require higher education institutions to demonstrate how they are following the Code when providing feedback to students in receipt of support from the taxpayer. (Paragraph 196)

Standards

75. We conclude that it is simplistic and unsatisfactory for higher education institutions to be seen to rely on the fact that international students continue to apply as evidence that standards are being maintained. It is absurd and disreputable to justify academic standards with a market mechanism. (paragraph 201)

76. The question of whether higher education offers graduates a suitable preparation both lifelong and lifewide in a changing world (see paragraph 7) is another matter, which our successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education may wish to examine. (paragraph 203)

77. The public purse supports higher education to the tune of £15 billion and it is essential those studying at higher education institutions are awarded degrees that measure accurately and consistently the intellectual development and skills that students have achieved. We consider that it is essential that a body concerns itself with assuring the comparability of standards both between institutions and over time. (paragraph 208)

The Quality Assurance Agency

78. In our view, it is matter of some regret—and a symptom of complacency—that it was only after pressure from outside the higher education sector, that is, the media, ministers and us that it appears that the QAA used the "cause for concern" process to examine more generally institutions' capacity to assure the academic standards and quality of their higher education programmes and awards. We consider that the QAA needs to make up for lost time and develop its expertise in this area. In addition, we consider that the Government and higher education institutions must find the resources to support this endeavour. (paragraph 216)

79. In our view a body with responsibilities for standards which has as its primary function promoting UK higher education would be misconceived and likely to undermine faith in the quality of higher education. (paragraph 218)

80. We consider that in not judging "the standards themselves", the QAA is taking an unduly limited view of its potential role. (paragraph 219)

81. We have concluded that, on balance, the QAA, rather than be abolished, should be reformed and re-established as a Quality and Standards Agency—possibly by Royal Charter (which was the arrangement used to set up the former Council for National Academic Awards)—with the responsibility for maintaining consistent, national standards in higher education institutions in England and for monitoring and reporting on standards. We also recommend that the remit of the new body include—if necessary, on the basis of statute—a duty to safeguard, and report on, standards in higher education in England. It should also report annually on standards to Parliament. We further recommend that, to ensure its independence, the funding of the Agency's activities in England be provided through a mechanism requiring half its funding to be provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and half from levies on higher education institutions in England. In making these recommendations we are looking to see a fundamental change in the operation of the QAA and that, if this cannot be achieved within two years, the QAA/Quality and Standards Agency should be abolished and an entirely new organisation be established in its place. (paragraph 220)

Variations in demands made of students

82. We conclude that it appears that different levels of effort are required in different universities to obtain degrees in similar subjects, which may suggest that different standards may be being applied. Furthermore, the HEPI studies' consistent message is that more research is necessary in this vital area of student contact, and we conclude that those responsible for standards in higher education (both institutions and the sector level bodies) should ensure that such research is carried out. (paragraph 222)

83. We recommend that the Government investigate and establish whether students in England spend significantly less time studying, which includes lectures, contact time with academic staff and private study, than their counterparts overseas and that, if this proves to be the case, establish what effect this has on the standards of degrees awarded by the higher education sector in England. (paragraph 224)

Assessment of teaching quality

84. We conclude that the reformed QAA's new remit should include the review of, and reporting, on the quality of teaching in universities and, where shortcomings are identified, ensuring that they are reported publicly and addressed by the institution concerned. We also conclude that the QAA should develop its current policy of giving greater attention to institutions' policies and procedures in relation to improving quality and that the QAA should produce more guidance and feedback based on its institutional reviews. (paragraph 226)

Institutional accreditation

85. We recommend that all higher education institutions in England have their accreditation to award degrees reviewed no less often than every 10 years by the reformed QAA. Where the Agency concludes that all or some of an institution's powers should be withdrawn, we recommend that the Government draw up and put in place arrangements which would allow accreditation to award degrees to be withdrawn or curtailed by the Agency. (paragraph 229)

86. We recommend that the reformed QAA have powers to carry out reviews of the quality of, and standards applied in, the assessment arrangements for an institution's courses, including, if necessary, its degree awarding powers, in response to external examiners' or public concerns about the standards in an institution or at the direction of the Secretary of State. (paragraph 230)

Whistle-blowers

87. We see grounds for concluding that the system for reviewing the concerns of academics about standards needs to be rebalanced to provide greater protection for those raising concerns alongside a clear move to independent and external review. Our initial view is that such a service which provides, for example, independent arbitration and adjudication might be the responsibility of a reformed QAA. We also recommend that Government bring forward legislation to strengthen the whistle-blowing procedures in the 1988 Education Reform Act to provide greater protection to academics. We are reluctant to go further and to reach firm conclusions without carrying out a more detailed inquiry into adequacy of the protection for whistle-blowers within higher education—and this is an issue that a successor committee with responsibility for scrutinising higher education may wish to return to—but on the basis of the evidence from individual academics and the UCU we consider that there could be a systematic problem here. (paragraph 235)

88. The case of Mr Cairns, the details of which we set out in chapter 6 of this Report, reinforces our uneasiness about the adequacy of the internal systems within higher education institutions to resolve disputes involving those who raise concerns about standards. In our view, the ability of an academic to appeal to an external, independent body would provide a safety-value for potentially explosive disputes. (paragraph 236)

The autonomy of higher education institutions

89. We recommend that the Government request HEFCE, the higher education sector and student bodies to draw up, and seek to agree, a concordat defining those areas over which universities have autonomy, including a definition of academic freedom and, on the other side, those areas where the Government, acting on behalf of the taxpayer, can reasonably and legitimately lay down requirements or intervene. (paragraph 242)

Degree classification

90. We recommend that the Higher Education Funding Council for England commission a study to examine the influences upon the classification of honours degrees since 1994 and that this be undertaken in a representative range of subject disciplines. (paragraph 251)

91. We consider that so long as there is a classification system it is essential that it should categorise all degrees against a consistent set of standards across all higher education institutions in England. (Paragraph 251)

92. We conclude that a key task of a reformed QAA, in consultation with higher education institutions and government, should be to define the characteristics of each class of honours degree and to ensure that the standards which each university draws up and applies are derived from these classification standards. (Paragraph 256)

Methods of assessment

93. We recommend that the government require those higher education institutions in receipt of support from the taxpayer to publish the details of the methodological assumptions underpinning assessments for all degrees. (paragraph 260)

94. We conclude that the QAA should review the methodological assumptions underpinning assessments for degrees to ensure that they meet acceptable statistical practice. (paragraph 260)

Record of achievement

95. We conclude that the HEAR and the current honours degree classification system should run in parallel for at least five years. (paragraph 264)

96. We conclude that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) should record academic achievement and reflect significant non-academic achievement. The record will, however, need to be carefully structured to enable a convenient reading of academic achievement separate from other activity. Furthermore, we consider that, as part of the review of the HEAR pilot, various good practice models incorporating the range of academic and non-academic elements, should be provided to enable those who will use the HEAR—for example, employers, those providing training and students themselves—to gain ready access to the information required. (paragraph 266)

External examiners

97. The starting point for the repair of the external examiner system is the recommendation made by the Dearing Report to the Quality Assurance Agency "to work with universities and other degree awarding institutions to create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions must select external examiners". We conclude that the sector should now implement this recommendation. Drawing on the evidence we received we would add that the reformed QAA should be given the responsibility of ensuring that the system of external examiners works and that, to enable comparability, the QAA should ensure that standards are applied consistently across institutions. We strongly support the development of a national "remit" for external examiners, clarifying, for example, what documents external examiners should be able to access, the extent to which they can amend marks—in our view, they should have wide discretion—and the matters on which they can comment. This should be underpinned with an enhanced system of training, which would allow examiners to develop the generic skills necessary for multi-disciplinary courses. We conclude that higher education institutions should only employ external examiners from the national pool. The system should also be transparent and we conclude that, to assist current and prospective students, external examiners' reports should be published without redaction, other than to remove material which could be used to identify an individual's mark or performance. (paragraph 273)

Plagiarism

98. We conclude that the growth in opportunities for plagiarism is such that the sector needs to be especially vigilant, establish the application of consistent approaches across the sector and ensure that it fully shares intelligence. We recognise that many students accused of plagiarism may be guilty of little more than failing to reference sources correctly and that the majority of students are conscientious and act in good faith. Given, however, the scale and potential for damage to the reputation of English universities it is vital that the problem is held in check and then progressively "educated" and "managed" out of the system. We recommend that the Government, in consultation with the higher education sector including students' representatives, put in place arrangements to establish standards, which set out what is and what is not plagiarism, ensure that comprehensive guidance is available across the sector, and co-ordinate action to combat plagiarism. One possible candidate for this work is the Higher Education Academy working with the reformed QAA. We also request that the Government, in responding to this Report, advise whether those providing or using so-called "writing services", to produce work which students can misrepresent as their own, are liable for criminal prosecution. (paragraph 279)

Manchester Metropolitan University

99. In this chapter we set out the circumstances of the case concerning Mr Cairns and Manchester Metropolitan University and our conclusions, which are for the House. (Paragraph 280)

100. The correct course for the University, if it had wished to challenge Mr Cairns' evidence, was to submit its own memorandum to the inquiry. (Paragraph 288)

101. In our view the action of the Vice-Chancellor and the Academic Board of Manchester Metropolitan University on 18 March 2009 in removing Mr Cairns from the Board could be regarded as interference with a witness and therefore a *prima facie* breach of privilege. If matters had remained there we would have consulted the Liaison Committee and requested the House to refer the matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. (Paragraph 291)

102. We found the decision whether to ask the House to refer the University's actions to the Committee on Standards and Privileges a very finely balanced one. In the end because the University has expressed regrets—albeit with reservations—and because Mr Cairns has rejoined the Academic Board, we have concluded that, while it is right to bring this serious matter to the attention of the House in this Report, in the circumstances we should not ask the House to refer the matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. We must, however, put on record that we deprecate the behaviour of the Vice-Chancellor and the members of the Academic Board of Manchester Metropolitan University not only for removing Mr Cairns from the Board on 18 March 2009, particularly as it appears without giving Mr Cairns the opportunity to respond, but also for the manner in which they have handled the matter since the events of 18 March. Having accepted that they made an error, the Vice-Chancellor and Academic Board should simply have accepted the consequence of their mistake, apologised and speedily restored Mr Cairns. (Paragraph 294)

103. We make it clear to Manchester Metropolitan University and to the higher education institutions in general that putting obstacles in the way of, or seeking to discourage through criticism, those who put evidence to Parliament or its committees are matters that we deprecate. We reiterate that the correct course for the University, if it had wished to challenge Ms Evans' evidence, was to submit its own memorandum to the inquiry. (Paragraph 297)

The higher education sector

104. We conclude that one of the challenges the higher education sector faces over the next decade is to develop greater openness and transparency in relation to, for example, academic standards, external examiners and the safeguarding of the student experience. (Paragraph 300)

Evidence for the formulation of policy

105. We are concerned that the higher education sector's lack of interest in research into parts of its own operation might be seen as a symptom of complacency and a reluctance to test and challenge assumptions, some of which in an increasingly global market for higher education may be outmoded. We see a role for Government here to identify, commission and publicise research on the operation of the higher education sector in England. (Paragraph 304)

Standards

106. It is unacceptable for the sector to be in receipt of departmental spending of £15 billion but be unable to answer a straightforward question about the relative standards of the degrees of the students, which the taxpayer has paid for. (Paragraph 305)

Quality and standards agency

107. We are clear that the sector needs to address the question of standards now. We have called for a new quality and standards agency, answerable jointly to higher education institutions and the Government, and reporting annually to Parliament. We envisage that such a body, expanding significantly from the work that the Quality Assurance Agency has done, will build and rejuvenate the limbs of the existing system that until relatively recently was working well—in particular, the system of external examiners—and to provide the best way to safeguard the integrity of standards in English higher education institutions. (Paragraph 307)

108. It will also naturally be part of such a development that the relationship between this new agency and the Higher Education Academy be reviewed, including clarification of the key responsibility for quality enhancement in regard to the student experience. Although we had reservations about the operation of the Academy, it could and, we believe, should have a key role in promoting and enhancing academic standards. (Paragraph 308)

109. The key to the successful transformation of higher education in England in the next decade will be to move away from a culture fixated on the most prestigious research-intensive universities and the results of the Research Assessment Exercise (and its replacement) to one where other models of study and university can thrive and excellence is recognised and rewarded for teaching supported by scholarship. (Paragraph 309)

Annex 1: Glossary of acronyms, initials and terms

ASKe	Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange
ASNs	Additional Student Numbers
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DELNI	Department for Employment and Learning (in Northern Ireland)
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
EC^{UK}	Engineering Council UK
ELQ	Students studying for qualifications equivalent or lower to qualification they already have attained
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher education
HEAR	Higher Education Achievement Report
HEDG	Heads of Educational Development Group
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIFES	Higher Education in Further Education: Students Survey
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency

HESES	Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey
IoD	Institute of Directors
Level 3	Level 3 qualifications include A-levels and certain diplomas
NAO	National Audit Office
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
NVQ	National vocational qualifications are work-related, competence-based qualifications.
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education in Higher Education
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QR funding	Funding provided for quality-related research
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SACWG	Student Assessment and Classification Working Group
SEDA	Staff and Educational Development Association
SEMTA	Sector Skills Council for science, engineering and manufacturing technologies
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UCAL	University of California
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCL	University College London
UCU	University and College Union
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills
UUK	Universities UK

Annex 2: Matters for possible future inquiry

Issue	Paragraph(s)
Autonomy of higher education institutions	237 and following
Demand led system of higher education, operation of	18
Further education, relationship with higher education, and provision of higher education in further education colleges and the question of a single funding stream for higher education and further education	75, 37
Higher Education Academy, operation and effectiveness of	181
International students	11
Lifelong and lifewide needs in a changing world, adequacy of higher education as preparation for	203
Masters degrees	11
Postgraduate students	11
Research Excellence Framework (REF), in particular its recognition of multi-disciplinary collaborative teams	159
Shortage of places at university in 2009	12 and following
STEM graduates, provision of	18, 95
Whistle-blowers, adequacy of protections for	235

Formal Minutes

Monday 20 July 2009

Members present:

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Tim Boswell	Mr Gordon Marsden
Dr Evan Harris	Ian Stewart
Dr Brian Iddon	Graham Stringer

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (*Students and Universities*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 309 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annexes 1 and 2 agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eleventh Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Written evidence was ordered to be reported to the House for printing with the Report together with written evidence reported and ordered to be published on 28 January, 16 and 18 March, 1 April, 6 May and 29 June.

[The Committee adjourned.

Witnesses

Monday 30 March 2009 [HC 370-ii]

Wednesday 29 April 2009 [HC 370-iii]

Wednesday 6 May 2009 [HC 170-iv]

Monday 11 May 2009 [HC 170-v]

List of written evidence

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2008–09

First Report	Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies	HC 48–I (HC 365)
Second Report	The Work of the Committee 2007-08	HC 49
Third Report	DIUS's Departmental Report 2008	HC 51–I (HC 383)
Fourth Report	Engineering: turning ideas into reality	HC 50–I
Fifth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Economic and Social Research Council, Dr Alan Gillespie CBE	HC 505
Sixth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Professor Sir Tom Blundell	HC 506
Seventh Report	Spend, spend, spend? – The mismanagement of the Learning and Skills Council's capital programme in further education colleges	HC 530
Eighth Report	Putting Science and Engineering at the Heart of Government Policy	HC 168-I
Ninth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, Professor Michael Sterling	HC 887
Tenth Report	Sites of Special Scientific Interest	HC 717

Session 2007-08

First Report	UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation	HC 185 (HC 459)
Second Report	The work and operation of the Copyright Tribunal	HC 245 (HC 637)
Third Report	Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)	HC 187–I (HC 638)
Fourth Report	Science Budget Allocations	HC 215 (HC 639)
Fifth Report	Renewable electricity-generation technologies	HC 216–I (HC 1063)
Sixth Report	Biosecurity in UK research laboratories	HC 360–I (HC 1111)
Seventh Report	Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the Draft Apprenticeships Bill	HC 1062–I (HC (2008–09)262)
First Special Report	The Funding of Science and Discovery Centres: Government Response to the Eleventh Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 214
Second Special Report	The Last Report: Government Response to the Thirteenth Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 244
Fourth Special Report	Investigating the Oceans: Government Response to the Science and Technology Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 506 [incorporating HC 469–i]