



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Students and Universities:
Government Response to
the Innovation,
Universities, Science and
Skills Committee's
Eleventh Report of Session
2008–09**

**Eighth Special Report of Session
2008–09**

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 14 October 2009*

HC 991
Published on 20 October 2009
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Office for Science.

Current membership

Mr Phil Willis (*Liberal Democrat, Harrogate and Knaresborough*)(Chairman)
Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (*Labour, City of Durham*)
Mr Tim Boswell (*Conservative, Daventry*)
Mr Ian Cawsey (*Labour, Brigg & Goole*)
Mrs Nadine Dorries (*Conservative, Mid Bedfordshire*)
Dr Evan Harris (*Liberal Democrat, Oxford West & Abingdon*)
Dr Brian Iddon (*Labour, Bolton South East*)
Mr Gordon Marsden (*Labour, Blackpool South*)
Dr Bob Spink (*Independent, Castle Point*)
Ian Stewart (*Labour, Eccles*)
Graham Stringer (*Labour, Manchester, Blackley*)
Dr Desmond Turner (*Labour, Brighton Kemptown*)
Mr Rob Wilson (*Conservative, Reading East*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental Select Committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_technology.cfm

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Glenn McKee (Clerk); Richard Ward (Second Clerk); Dr Christopher Tyler (Committee Specialist); Xameerah Malik (Committee Specialist); Andrew Boyd (Senior Committee Assistant); Camilla Brace (Committee Assistant); Dilys Tonge (Committee Assistant); Jim Hudson (Committee Support Assistant); and Becky Jones (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Science and Technology Committee, Committee Office, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general inquiries is: 020 7219 2793; the Committee's e-mail address is: scitechcom@parliament.uk.

Eighth Special Report

On 2 August 2009 the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee published its Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09, *Students and Universities* [HC 170–I]. On 1 October 2009 the Science and Technology Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as an appendix to this Report.

Appendix: Government response

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to this report by the Select Committee and has considered the wide ranging and substantial number of recommendations carefully. We are pleased that a range of the recommendations of the Committee refer to action already in train. We are somewhat disappointed that the Committee has not reflected in its report, the very strong and positive evidence about the UK higher education sector which was given during the inquiry. We believe that the picture of our higher education system which emerged in the report was far less positive than is in fact the case.

2. The Government agrees with the Committee that students are and should be at the heart of the higher education system and that their perspectives are vital in developing and maintaining a sector which is respected internationally for excellence. The performance of our universities and colleges, both through world class research and high quality teaching is crucial in ensuring that the UK has the intellectually and vocationally equipped people needed to succeed in a global economy.

3. The Government has provided significant funding for higher education over the last ten years—an increase of around 25% in real terms. We have also expanded and diversified the student population—presiding over an increase of 21% over this period. The Government is pleased that the Committee welcomes so many of our recent policies to widen participation. The proportions of entrants to higher education from low participation neighbourhoods and state schools have increased, and are now at their highest ever level. This shows the impact that the Government's long term investment in widening participation is having. We remain committed to the expansion of our higher education system and to raising aspirations and standards in schools and to ensuring that all young people fulfil their potential. Of course expansion must be managed carefully in order to retain our position as a world leader in providing quality higher education.

4. The UK has an internationally excellent higher education sector with high levels of reported satisfaction both from students and employers. Government does not directly control higher education; higher education institutions are autonomous bodies with individual missions and priorities. Together, the sector and Government must strive for continuous improvement. We need to ensure that taxpayers are well-served by their investment and so we and our agencies are committed to inspiring excellence and

encouraging the UK higher education sector to offer a high quality experience for all its students.

5. There are a significant number of conclusions in the Committee's report and we have set out our response in Part 2. Some responses have been grouped and as the report notes in paragraph 32 some conclusions and recommendations will be for consideration by others in the higher education sector. Due to the devolved responsibility for higher education the Government's comments refer to England only unless otherwise specified.

Part Two: 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 in responding to this Report the Government set out a detailed timetable for publishing the higher education framework. (Paragraph 10)

1. Over the last year the Government has stimulated a wide ranging debate and discussion about the future of our higher education sector. We are grateful to have received a number of learned contributions. Our document setting out the Higher Education Framework for the next decade will be published this Autumn and will provide the context for the independent review of tuition fees which will commence later this year. The Framework will set the context within which higher education will operate over the next 10–15 years, one which recognises the challenges of global competition at the same time as meeting the needs of our society and developing and maintaining the UK's world class status in higher education.

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)

2. The Government has noted the Committee's recommendation. The Government has indicated that it intends to undertake a review of postgraduate policy which will report in June 2010 and will be happy to report on this activity to the successor Committee.

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)

3. The Government remains committed to ensuring that all those who can benefit from higher education can do so. As we look to the future, we need to ensure that any increase in student numbers is managed in the interests of students, the economy and the universities themselves. In recent years, there has been faster growth in the student population than was planned. Unplanned growth places extra pressures on publicly funded student support budgets. The balance that we must strike is not allowing so much unplanned expansion that student support costs to the public purse exceed expectations.

4. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocates funds to institutions based on agreed strategic priorities. This includes taking account of widening participation. In 2008 HEFCE allocated 9,953 Additional Student Numbers of which 4,805 were full time and 5,148 part time. The full time figure of 4,805 includes an estimated 3,000 additional first year entrants. The balance would be used to cover subsequent years of study by previous years' new entrants and the strategic development and growth plans of institutions. This approach meant there was a significant increase in the overall student population this year due to previous years' entrant growth and numbers will still be at a historical high. The Secretary of State announced a further 10,000 places for 2009–10 to meet unprecedented demand. Not everyone who applies for a place in higher education can get one and securing a place has always been a competitive process, but we can reasonably predict that around 50,000 more applicants, in 2009/10, will accept a place than in the academic year 2006/7.

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)

5. The Government rejects this recommendation. The Government notes the comments on the provision of figures for new entrants. However, the balance between new full time and part-time places should not be ordained by Ministers months in advance of final information about the demand for places from students. The process for the allocation of Additional Student Numbers (ASN) needs to allow institutions a degree of flexibility to respond to the decisions of prospective new entrants. In addition, and crucially, it needs to respect institutions' autonomy in matters of recruitment. So, the ASN process has never been simply about setting a number for new entrant undergraduate places and then asking institutions to deliver this.

6. Instead, the overall total of full time equivalent places that will be fully funded is set by the Government usually through the annual grant letter to HEFCE. It is then for the Funding Council, working with institutions to determine the precise balance of places, bearing in mind a number of factors. These include allowing for growth to cover subsequent years of study by previous years' new entrants and the strategic development

and growth plans of institutions. Therefore, at the time the Government announces the number of ASNs for a particular year it cannot be known what the balance of provision will be, particularly between full and part time study.

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)

7. The Government has noted these suggestions for areas of future scrutiny by the new Committee.

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 fulltime 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)

8. The Government has noted the Committee's suggestion.

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)

9. The use of contextual data is not a new issue, as the report notes. It was discussed in the 2004 Schwartz Higher Education Review Group report on *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*. A review of the recommendations in the Schwartz report already undertaken and published in December last year found that over half of higher education institutions responding thought that an applicant's educational context should be considered in admissions decision-making. It is right that universities will want to make sure that they are attracting people to their courses with the talent and potential to succeed at the highest levels. Taking into account the full range of information available to institutions to recruit students will help them to get the best possible candidates from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances with the potential to succeed. The Secretary of State has already said that there was a strong case for using contextual information to identify talented young people (in his speech at Birkbeck College on July 27th 2009). Government has no power to intervene directly in recruitment procedures. The way in which each institution chooses whether and how to use such data about its candidates is for it to determine as an independent, autonomous organisation but we expect there to be a fair and transparent recruitment process.

10. SPA, the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme, has as one of its objectives for the next three years to work with providers of higher education to develop principles of good practice in the use of contextual or additional data to support fair student recruitment and admissions decision-making. The Higher Education Framework will be the place where the Government lays out the future path for widening participation and in particular fair access.

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)

11. The Government agrees that the principle of Fair Access is paramount. The existing Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice includes a section on admissions – *Admissions to Higher Education*.

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)

12. The Government does not believe that this should be led centrally. It is important to remember that the Schwartz Review concluded that the admission system was generally fair. The sector led Delivery Partnership and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme are already developing good practice to ensure that admission systems develop and continue to be fair. This year the Government has already, through HEFCE, asked all higher education institutions to produce widening participation strategic assessments containing their policies on fair admissions and the broad level of resource that institutions commit to widening participation.

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)

13. The higher education sector is already developing national arrangements for academic credit. The higher education credit framework for England was issued by the sector in August 2008. Higher education institutions have been asked (not required) to credit-rate their main provision for the start of the 2009/10 academic year. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE are currently surveying the sector to get a full understanding of the use of credit in higher education in England, the degree to which arrangements in institutions are aligned with the national guidance and whether institutions will be making their credit values publicly available.

14. The Government will continue to encourage the use of academic credit. But, it will remain a matter for each institution to decide on admissions to its programmes and in particular whether a credit rated achievement at another institution is a suitable qualification to join a programme that it runs. This is important, not simply because of the autonomy of institutions but because without the ability to make individual judgments there is a risk of students entering programmes for which they are unsuited.

15. The Government is also working closely with a group of research intensive universities to pilot a range of approaches to target and support the most able, but least likely students to apply to these universities. The “Realising Opportunities” project was begun by a group of 11 research intensive universities. It will inform the development of a nationally available scheme from 2012. One element to be tested through the pilot phase is

mutual recognition of outreach activities undertaken with any of the participating institutions. Indeed, many universities are already working together in this area and the HEFCE report *'Compact Schemes in Higher Education Institutions'* (2008/32) provides details of a wide range of progression agreements across the sector.

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)

16. There is steady progress in widening participation. Data shows that between 2002/03 and 2007/08 the gap in participation in higher education between higher and lower socio-economic classes narrowed by 7 percentage points, and the proportions of higher education entrants from low participation neighbourhoods and state schools are increasing.

17. The *'New Opportunities—Fair Chances for the Future'* White Paper published in January 2009 set out plans to support a richer and a fairer nation in the upturn. This includes support for high performing pupils from low income backgrounds to progress to higher education. The Government will be considering the implications of the report by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (the Milburn report August 2009) in this area. The Milburn report adds to a key debate for this country on social mobility.

18. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) have reviewed (in 2008) what more could be done to remove barriers to level 3 attainment. Officials at both DCSF and the LSC are continuing to take forward the detailed recommendations of that review. The 14–19 qualifications strategy will deliver more streamlined and simpler qualifications and will ensure that all young people have access to an attractive and coherent offer of qualifications that enable them to achieve their full potential. The strategy will also help employers and universities to better understand the qualifications that young people have gained, and be confident that they are equipping them well for further study and the world of work. We shall review general qualifications in 2013 once we are able to see how they fit with new options like the Diploma, to check that they remain fit for purpose.

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)

19. The Government is committed to ensuring that everyone who can benefit can access higher education. We recognise that further education colleges are important providers of higher education courses, and HEFCE supports them to develop this provision. This work aims to help them build on strengths, develop distinctive provision, respond to local demand, develop education and training in higher-level skills, widen participation, and increase the accessibility of higher education. A study undertaken by Professor Joy Carter on the progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education is helping to inform development of Government's Higher Education Framework. This study emphasises the need to see higher-level learning as a system, comprising a range of providers – higher education, further education, private training providers and employers themselves. Around 10 per cent of undergraduate entrants are taught in English further education colleges. Over 121,934 higher education students were studying in further education colleges in England in 2007/08. These students participate in a wide range of higher education provision including Foundation degrees and other franchised provision, and some of the further education colleges are applying for degree awarding powers. Some 45% of part-time, and 63% of full-time, Foundation degree students between 2001/02 and 2007/08 were taught in further education colleges. The Government set out its policy on delivery of higher education in further education colleges in the March 2006 White Paper *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (Cmd 6476) and we believe the position set out there remains valid.

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)

20. The Government has noted the Committee's recommendation.

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)

21. Effective outreach, involving stronger relationships between schools, colleges and higher education institutions is a key plank of our widening participation agenda. From this year (2009/10) HEFCE will redistribute £30 million within the main teaching grant to better recognise working intensively with schools and colleges.

22. In addition, HEFCE will be reviewing widening participation strategic assessments provided this Summer. These assessments, which are a condition of institutions' continuing receipt of the widening participation element of the funding allocation, will set out details of individual institutions' outreach activity and form the basis of future bilateral discussions between the institution and the Funding Council. Institutions will also be expected to report annually in December on progress with widening participation, including outreach activity.

23. HEFCE is using research to engage academic staff in the widening participation (WP) agenda, for example, through the £2 million invested in a widening participation strand of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme to support a number of WP research studies. This approach supports investigation of widening participation issues as an academically credible research topic which will both add to the robustness of the evidence base and encourage more researchers to engage with the agenda. In addition, HEFCE have introduced the Annual Aimhigher Awards which, while having a strong focus on learners' involvement, also include awards that recognise the work of practitioners and individuals who have excelled in representing the Aimhigher programme and their contribution to widening participation.

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)

24. Higher education institutions work with schools in a rich variety of innovative and collaborative ways to enhance the life-chances of young people, helping them to fulfil their potential and make the most of higher education and the benefits it brings. Evidence provided by higher education institutions to the National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE) underlined the extent of current links and partnerships with schools. Universities UK published a special report describing many of the ways in which universities work with schools to raise awareness of higher education, identify the potential in students and improve attainment in schools

Higher education engagement with schools and colleges: partnership development
(Universities UK May 2009; ISBN 978 1 84036 203 9);
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/HEengagementwithschools.pdf

Separately, a recent assessment by the Government showed that well over half of the universities in England are now involved in the Academies programme, and the number continues to increase. In the Trust Schools programme, two-thirds of 'live' Trusts have a higher education institution partner and more than 70 universities are working with over 250 schools looking to acquire trust status.

25. The Committee's recommendation follows a reference to STEM-related support initiatives they had experienced during their visit to the USA. In this country, as part of the Government's wide range of work to engage more young people in STEM subjects at all levels, we are involving higher education institutions to support schools through a number of programmes. This includes the triple science GCSE support programme where higher education institutions provide facilities and equipment to support teaching and learning, and host visits by pupils to nurture aspirations. There is similar institution engagement in the further mathematics support programme, and institutions are also being encouraged to get involved in the work of the regional network of physics A level support centres that will start in September 2009 and which aim to widen participation in physics, particularly among girls.

26. There is also the Student Associate Scheme (SAS)—a key part of the drive to increase the number of STEM teachers—which enables science and mathematics undergraduates to spend time in schools supporting teachers and deciding whether to become teachers themselves. The Training and Development Agency for Schools have annually increased the numbers of students undertaking their 3 week placements in schools covering STEM subjects. In the academic year 2008/09, 4,866 SAS placements related to STEM subjects—approximately 57% of the total. The numbers in 2006/7 and 2007/8 were 3,620 and 4,241 respectively. A recent independent survey that reported in May 2009, showed that 64% of all SAS students go on into teacher training, where retention rates for this group are generally high. About half of these had been in STEM placements.

27. HEFCE is also providing funding of £20 million over three years for the National higher education STEM programme. The programme will build on the activity, experience and expertise developed within four pilot projects: Chemistry for our Future, Stimulating Physics, the London Engineering Project and More Maths Grads. The professional bodies and learned societies that are already leading these demand-raising projects in schools will continue to be involved in the national phase of the initiative. As well as increasing and widening participation in the key STEM disciplines, the national programme will address the needs of students and employers through helping to develop more responsive and flexible STEM curricula and raising the skills of the current workforce.

28. NCEE recognised however, that now is the time to be more ambitious in promoting collaboration, and that is the basis for the seven recommendations they made last year to extend and strengthen further the links and partnerships between higher education institutions and schools

National Council for Educational Excellence: Recommendations
(DCSF and DIUS October 2008);

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee/docs/7898-DCSF-NatCouncilEd.pdf>.

29. The Government, along with partners and relevant stakeholders, are working together to implement the NCEE recommendations and to mobilise the different parts of the education world behind them. Good progress is being made and we expect in the Autumn to publish a “one year on” progress report from the NCEE. This will highlight what has been achieved in key areas such as starting aspirations-raising work earlier in

primary schools; promoting participation in STEM subjects and modern foreign languages; and improving information, advice and guidance (IAG) in secondary schools.

30. The Government will also continue its programme of transforming IAG by publishing a new Information Advice and Guidance strategy in the Autumn which will bring together a number of policies into a coherent strategy that explains what we are doing to improve support for young people to help them progress. The strategy will send out strong messages to schools, colleges and local authorities to improve the quality of IAG as a major contributor to raising aspirations and supporting our drive towards Raising the Participation Age. It will be a powerful driver of progress and expectation and the first substantive policy document on IAG since 2004.

31. The Government has also rolled out Aimhigher Associates nationwide, following a pathfinder phase which started last year. 5,500 Associates—undergraduates mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds—will be helping 21,000 young people from similar backgrounds through educational transitions and into higher education. Schools and universities work together to identify the right young people, provide training for Associates and school staff and facilitate the mentoring sessions.

32. In recognition of the additional costs involved in developing deeper, more structural links with schools, HEFCE have transferred £30 million into the widening participation allocation to enable institutions to enhance and develop such links. HEFCE have also funded 11 projects to evaluate existing models of engagement between higher education institutions and schools in terms of the robustness of the relationships and their effectiveness in achieving the aims and objectives of both partners. Further funding will be provided for up to three of the existing projects to enhance and possibly extend current models and seek to transfer either whole models or elements of them to other institutions.

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)

33. The Government has noted the Committee's recommendation.

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)

34. The Government agrees that there is an important role for the provision of higher education within the further education sector. Our priorities of developing programmes that reflect higher level skills needs through partnerships with employers will create further opportunities for colleges. But the balance of provision between universities and further education colleges, including the pace of future growth, should be an outcome of student and employer choice, rather than central planning.

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)

35. A Foundation Year is a type of bridging course designed to prepare students for higher education generally. It can be a specialist programme, as is common in Art and Design or STEM subject areas for instance. Or it can be a general ‘access’ programme designed to enhance study skills and critical analytical skills that will be needed for degree level study. There is no necessary connection between Foundation Degrees and Foundation Years.

36. A Foundation degree (Fd) is an employment-related higher education qualification located at Level 5 on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), an Honours degree is Level 6. After completing their Foundation degree some students go on to study for an Honours Degree but a Foundation degree is a free standing qualification in its own right, designed with employers to meet their needs. Fds are delivered by a wide range of institutions—both universities and further education colleges.

37. Foundation degree students are entitled to the same financial student support as all other higher education students. The annual grant letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England sets out the aspiration to an Fd participation rate of 100,000 by 2010. The current number of students is almost 87,000. Both Foundation Degrees and Foundation Years in their very different ways and at different levels contribute to the creation of higher education pathways for people from a range of backgrounds.

38. The Government’s response to recommendation 15 confirms that an English higher education credit framework is in place. Progress is being made in joint work between the further education and higher education sectors in establishing a set of overarching principles and shared operational criteria for a common approach to credit.

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)

39. The Government has noted the Committee’s comment.

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)

40. The Government provides significant dedicated funding to higher education institutions to help them maintain and improve student retention. In 2009–10 HEFCE is providing £225.4 million directly to higher education institutions to support their improvement strategies (£171.0 million for full-time students and £54.4 million for part-time students). We agree that it is very important that institutions understand how to support all students to help them complete their courses and make the most of their time in higher education.

41. Following the NAO and PAC reports, the Performance Indicators Steering Group convened by HEFCE has been exploring the issue of retention of part-time students. In April 2009 it was agreed that HEFCE would work with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to allow publication in 2010 of indicators of part-time entrants studying at 30% or more of full study. HEFCE and HESA are making good progress in taking forward this work and an appropriate part-time retention performance indicator for first-degree activity should be published in 2010.

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)

42. Higher education institutions provide a range of student services according to the identified needs of their student body, including pastoral and counselling support and tailored support for new incoming students. The Government recognises the importance of quality support services and their value in helping students to complete their courses and make the most of their time in higher education. We will continue to encourage the sector to review its provision and to learn from sharing best practice in this area. HEFCE provides specific funding to support student retention, which is weighted according to the age and prior educational attainment of each institution's new undergraduates. A new centralised requirement must involve new reporting and monitoring arrangements and we consider that this would tend to focus attention on compliance rather than addressing the broader issues. AMOSSHE (the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education) also plays a role in supporting higher education institutions to continue to improve their student services.

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)

43. The statutory duty to provide careers education was extended in 2003 to include all young people aged 11–16. In addition all young people have access, from the age of 13, to Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) services delivered by their local authority through Connexions. The Key Stage 2 Pathfinders that began in September 2009 will explore options for improving support for young people at an earlier age.

44. The Government intends to publish a new Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy which will bring together a number of policies into a coherent strategy that explains what we are doing to improve support for young people to help them progress. It will set out our expectations of delivery partners; outline the support that we are providing to help schools, colleges, local authorities and others to improve their provision, and explain the arrangements for holding the different parts of the delivery system to account.

45. See also the Government's response to recommendation 22.

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)

46. The Government agrees that it would be helpful for prospective students to have access to better information about student workloads including but not necessarily restricted to: the type and amount of contact they can expect with staff; the type and amount of private study they are likely to need to undertake; and the academic support which will be available from staff.

47. The Government agrees that information should also be available about different types of learning, for example lectures, seminars and tutorials, and the extent to which new and emerging technologies should be available. The Government will look to HEFCE to work with the sector to enable such information to be made available by higher education institutions, or through central provision of information in initiatives such as the www.unistats.com site in a robust and comparable way. The information which institutions provide will, as now, be subject to comment by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). In addition, HEFCE will be commissioning research into the information needs of prospective students, and other users of higher education. This will ensure that any changes to requirements for the provision of information are based in evidence of student need and in a way they want to receive it.

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)

48. The Government welcomes the Committee's support for the National Student Survey.

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)

49. The Government is confident that the National Student Survey (NSS) is a robust and independent survey with high credibility amongst the thousands of students that take part in it. Over the last five years the numbers of students taking part have increased from around 170,000 to over 220,000 in 2009, and the proportion grown to over 60% of final year students. HEFCE has thorough procedures in place for investigating the very small number of allegations of improper conduct which have been made, only one of which resulted in the institution concerned having to take action.

50. The National Union of Students has taken a welcome and active role in supporting and promoting the NSS amongst students, and in helping student unions to understand and act on the results of the Survey. To this end there are already funding arrangements in place between HEFCE and the NUS to support the NUS in its important work in this area.

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)

51. The Government does not publish league tables for higher education. It is the producers of league tables who decide what sources of information to use as a basis for the information provided. The Government believes it is in the interests of higher education, students and the public that valid robust and comparable information about the sector is

available. This is why the Government encouraged the development of the Teaching Quality Information initiative which has led to a range of information being published on the Unistats website. This includes data such as National Student Survey scores, links to Quality Assurance Agency Audit Reports, requirements for entry qualifications, degree attainment data and graduate destination data. Unistats enables cross-comparison of this data across a number of institutions.

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)

52. The Government believes the great strength of the National Student Survey (NSS) is in its focus on teaching and learning, an area that directly affects all students in higher education. Increasing the list of questions would raise administrative costs and we believe has the potential to jeopardise rates of completion. The Government believes that the questions should be reviewed over time, but that the overall burden on students should be kept to a minimum. HEFCE, with the sector, will be undertaking a review of Teaching Quality Information and the NSS which will inform its ongoing development and will consider what additional areas, if any, should be included in the NSS.

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)

53. The Government rejects this recommendation. The Government has already asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England to develop and publish suitable indicators and benchmarks of performance in the higher education sector. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has published these on behalf of HEFCE since 2002/03. They include widening participation indicators measuring the proportion of entrants to each higher education institution coming from state schools and colleges, lower socio-economic groups and low participation neighbourhoods.

54. See also paragraph 22 (information about the introduction of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments).

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 socioeconomic 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)

55. The independent review of fees will look at the alternative methods of securing the funds needed to sustain a strong higher education sector and will not be concerned exclusively with the appropriate level of fees within the current structure.

56. Introducing tuition fees was one of the most important public sector reforms of the last decade and a major achievement of this Government. Variable tuition fees have generated a new, secure income stream worth an extra £1.3 billion a year for institutions. The final terms of reference for the independent review will be published in due course but they will be at least as broad as those given in a Written Ministerial statement by then Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, in 2004. Those draft terms of reference went beyond an exclusive focus on the level of fees and included:

- The provision of bursaries and other financial support.
- Student support arrangements, including those for those from the poorest backgrounds as well as those above the threshold for Government support.

- Choice of institution and course, mode of study (full time/part time).
- Levels of debt; students' assessment of the value of higher education, and rates of return from gaining a degree.
- Whether any improvements should be made to the graduate contribution scheme and the upper limit for tuition fees.
- What changes should be made to the arrangements for student support in order to ensure that students from the poorest family backgrounds on the most expensive courses receive support at a level equivalent to the maximum level of fees.
- Any differential effect on particular groups; for example, lower socioeconomic groups; men and women; different ethnic groups; people with disabilities; people from different regions.

57. The Government intends to commission and publish independent research covering a broad range of subject areas to inform the fees review. Data from a range of bodies, including Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and HEFCE, will be made available to the independent review.

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 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)

58. It will be for the fees review to examine the future of bursaries and to make recommendations. The view that the current system is unduly complex will no doubt be considered by the review. However, the Government does not support a national bursary scheme. The needs-based entitlement to financial support for each student is rightly determined and paid through the state support system. Financial support to students by universities through bursaries has always been understood to be in addition to this.

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)

59. The Government will not pre-empt the work of the independent commission by commenting on possible levels of fees. Whilst a final 'terms of reference' will be published in due course, the terms of reference will be at least as broad as those given by Charles Clarke in 2004 (see paragraph 56) and will therefore cover the recommendations and comments made above.

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)

60. The scheme to assist service leavers into higher education begins in the next academic year (2009/10). Along with the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will be monitoring the operation of the scheme and Government will want to review it in due course and learn any lessons it offers.

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)

61. On 23 September 2009 HEFCE published a consultation document with proposals for the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The Government expects that the REF will make use of a range of factors to assess research excellence, impact and the research environment. Research quality will be assessed by panels with a broad range of expertise with mechanisms in place to ensure that all research is assessed by people with the appropriate expertise. In a change from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the REF will for the first time explicitly assess the economic and social impact of excellent research as a distinct element.

62. It is anticipated that REF will consider research excellence and impact in relation to units of activity defined in disciplinary terms, though these may be broader and fewer in number than in the RAE. Higher education institutions will identify the researchers whose work is to be assessed and a number of outputs produced by each of them. These outputs may however be the outcome of work by an individual or by a team, which could be cross disciplinary, cross-university or involve researchers from outside higher education. Where

research is produced by teams that operate across more than one unit or university, all units with participating researchers would be able to submit their researchers' outputs.

63. Building on the approach of the RAE, the Government expects the REF to have effective mechanisms to ensure that interdisciplinary research is well assessed by people with the appropriate expertise, including a broader range of expertise within panels and the ability of panels to refer research between panels with expertise in different disciplines.

64. The Government expects that units will be asked to explain how they support interdisciplinary and collaborative research under the research environment element. Under the impact element they will be given credit for impact achieved where interdisciplinary research contributes to solving real world problems.

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)

65. Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) is the methodology used by higher education institutions in the UK to cost their activities. TRAC was first introduced in higher education institutions in 2000. The TRAC costing methodology takes institutions' audited accounts as a starting point, but then includes two adjustments to recognise full economic costs (as opposed to reported expenditure in the accounts). Institutions then attribute costs to different activities and relate this to the income received. The standard categories distinguish between publically funded teaching, non-publically funded teaching, publically funded research, non-publically funded research and other sources of income or costs. Aggregate data for UK higher education institutions are published by HEFCE and the other UK higher education funding bodies. HEFCE is able to use this information to confirm that the public funding received in respect of both teaching and research is fully utilised to fund public teaching activities and public research activities.

66. The Government considers that this approach directly addresses the concerns raised by the Committee without introducing new reporting burdens on higher education institutions. As the TRAC methodology continues to evolve, HEFCE will consider with institutions whether there is further information that could be made available without imposing undesirable inflexibilities on the system of higher education funding.

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)

67. The Government has noted the Committee's recommendation to universities.

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)

68. The additional memorandum which the Government supplied on 21 May, in response to a request from the Committee, noted that there have been a number of studies in recent years, with the balance of the evidence ebbing and flowing. The memorandum, with input from HEFCE, noted that HEFCE's funding has recognised the value of connecting teaching and research—and that research studies have shown that links between the two are not automatic. It also noted that the Higher Education Academy has produced recent reports and held events (a) to assist institutions in strategic development of links between research and teaching and (b) to help departments and individual academics develop their skills and curricula to enhance the synergies between research and teaching. The Government does not consider there would be added value in its commissioning further, specific independent research on this subject at this stage.

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)

69. HEFCE has started consulting in detail on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) by publishing the consultation document on 23 September. The Government expects that excellent research into pedagogy and teaching will be recognised in the assessment of the quality of submitted outputs in these fields. HEFCE will build on the Research Assessment Exercise 2008 approach to ensuring that pedagogical research is submitted to the appropriate panels, and is assessed by people with the appropriate expertise and that all inter-disciplinary outputs are assessed fairly.

70. The REF will explicitly assess the economic and social impact of excellent research as a distinct element. The Government expects this will include recognition of impacts on teaching where high quality pedagogic research informs teaching practice across a discipline or disciplines. Where teaching improves research this would contribute to the quality of research outputs assessed. The research environment element of REF will

consider the contribution the submitting unit is making to training the next generation of researchers.

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)

71. While the Government encourages clarity and professionalism, higher education institutions are autonomous institutions. Their criteria for appointments and promotions are a matter of internal management. However, the Government has encouraged institutions to reward and recognise teaching in their performance arrangements and human resource strategies. The Rewarding and Developing Staff initiative (2001–2006) supported significant development of human resource management in the sector and included publication of human resource strategies. All higher education institutions have now also completed a self-assessment process, as a requirement to mainstreaming the funding. The Government will ask HEFCE to work with the sector to ensure institutional strategies are accessible and include information about appointment and promotion criteria in relation to recognising and rewarding skills, scholarship and research in the area of pedagogy.

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)

72. The Government agrees that the Higher Education Academy has a key role to play in promoting and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience. The Government will be discussing with HEFCE and with the Academy and their subscribers in the sector, how its profile and awareness of its significant role in quality enhancement can be raised, and how the strengths identified in the review of the Academy can be further developed.

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)

73. The Government agrees with the importance of keeping under review the performance and effectiveness of the Higher Education Academy. That is why there was a review in 2008 and why there are arrangements in place for monitoring and performance

enhancement. There is a process already underway through which the Higher Education Academy has identified ways to strengthen its work in the light of the recommendations in the evaluation undertaken by Oakleigh, published in January 2008, and the effectiveness of this work and continuing plans for performance enhancement will be reported to all the funding councils later this year. The Government's view is that it would be sensible for this process to be completed and for HEFCE to consider the outcome before initiating any further evaluation. It is also important to recognise that the Higher Education Academy operates across the whole of the UK.

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)

74. The National Student Forum helps amplify the student voice to Government, higher education institutions and national stakeholders. Paul Ramsden, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy met the National Student Forum last year as part of the Forum's consideration of teaching and learning issues. The Government agrees that it is important for the Higher Education Academy to involve students in its work and it does indeed involve students at a range of levels; current examples include involvement in the Academy's governance arrangements and supporting student networks – such as a 'Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' student network. There is a potential risk of duplication—both of overheads and work—if the Higher Education Academy were to establish its own student forum. It is for the Academy to consider how best to continue to develop its engagement with students.

75. The Committee has raised an important issue about the operation and use of the Professional Standards Framework and the Government welcomes that the Higher Education Academy intends to review how the Professional Standards Framework is being used in the sector, in consultation with UUK and GuildHE.

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)

76. The Government agrees that it is important that established academic staff are encouraged to engage in professional development in relation to their teaching responsibilities. One existing aim of the Higher Education Academy is to lead, support and inform the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education. It does that through, for example, its Professional Recognition Scheme and the National Teaching

Fellowship Scheme. The Government will ask HEFCE to explore, with the Higher Education Academy, how the support that it offers could be better promoted to institutions, and will ask HEFCE to explore with the sector whether institutions' human resource strategies provide adequate information about their approach to staff professional development. The Higher Education Academy intends to review how the Professional Standards Framework is being used in the sector, in consultation with UUK and GuildHE.

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)

77. The Committee's observations and recommendations about teaching qualifications and training are a helpful contribution to the Government's deliberations about incentivising and promoting the importance of high quality teaching in higher education. The 2003 White Paper *'The Future of Higher Education'* (Cmd 5735) made a number of recommendations intended to raise the profile of high quality teaching in higher education, which led amongst other things to the development of the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and increasing the size of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. It also set out the Government's expectation that all new teaching staff would obtain a qualification which meets the requirements of the PSF. The Government is aware

of the range of views that were expressed to the Committee about teaching qualifications and believes it is right that higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring their staff hold appropriate qualifications and have opportunities for development and training.

78. The Government will however ask HEFCE to explore with the sector whether institutions' human resource strategies provide adequate information about their approach to staff professional development (including information about initial training). This would build on existing practice, which is that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) will often comment within the audit process on the staff development statements included in the self-assessment documents produced for institutional audit.

79. The involvement of graduate students in teaching roles varies across the sector and the Government does not consider that a review of their use would produce benefit. The Government will however ask the Higher Education Academy to better promote to higher education institutions the guidance which they can offer to support graduate students in teaching roles. Institutions should be providing professional development in teaching for graduate students, and considering how graduate students who have considerable teaching roles can be enabled to become Associate Fellows.

80. The Government does not disagree with recommendation 72 but considers that there are sufficient processes in place for students to convey concerns about poor teaching through, for example, staff/student consultative committees, student fora, and the involvement of students in institutional audit (where review teams will meet students and scrutinise issues directly relevant to students such as the means by which they can give feedback on the quality of provision). All universities have their own internal complaints processes: if those do not satisfy a student's complaint they can ask the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to consider it.

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)

81. The Government agrees with this recommendation and will ask HEFCE, with the Higher Education Academy and the sector, to explore with the sector whether institutions' human resource strategies provide adequate information about their approach to staff professional development, including continuing development.

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)

82. The Government agrees that quality, timely assessment and feedback which meet student expectations are important. That is why significant amounts of work have been, and are being carried out across the sector, centrally and within institutions, not least in response to National Student Survey results on assessment and feedback. The Higher Education Academy supports higher education institutions in improving assessment and feedback for example by producing useful resources, disseminating effective practice and direct work with students and institutions. The report of the Quality sub-committee of HEFCE's Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee, which was established last year especially to look into the allegations of concerns about quality and standards in higher education covered in the media, has made recommendations to ensure that assessment practices continue to improve. The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) report *'Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England'* recommends a review of assessment practice aimed at improving the robustness and consistency of assessment and classification practice across and between institutions. And the QAA is in the process of reviewing the Academic Infrastructure—the set of reference tools which promote comparability of standards across the sector—to check whether it remains fit for purpose or needs to be updated. The section of the QAA Code of Practice dealing with assessment is one element of the Academic Infrastructure and so is likely to be evaluated as part of the QAA's review.

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)

83. It has never been the Government's sole argument that high levels of demand from international students prove the quality of our system. Lord Dearing's Commission pointed out very clearly that the ability of our universities to attract international students depended in part on their reputation for quality. Whilst it is also true that institutions point to UK higher education's reputation for high quality as one of the reasons for its popularity amongst international students, they do not rely solely on that as a mark of quality.

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)

84. The Government has noted the Committee's recommendation.

The Quality Assurance Agency

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)

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)

85. The Government’s views about the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have been made clear – that it does a good job but needs to take on a more public-facing role and one which allows any concerns about quality or standards to be investigated quickly, transparently and robustly. The Government believes that this can be achieved without the overheads and disruption which would be caused by formally re-establishing the QAA as a new Quality and Standards Agency.

86. The public communication role which the then Secretary of State, the Rt Hon. John Denham MP described for the future of the QAA in his appearance before the committee is one which communicates very clearly, both inside and outside higher education, the range of processes that higher education institutions and the QAA go through to maintain and enhance quality and standards.

87. The QAA does make a judgement following institutional audit about an institution's management of the academic standards of its awards as well as its management of the quality of its courses. The QAA also has the ability to undertake more in-depth reviews if audits or other sources such as the Cause for Concern procedure deem that necessary.

88. The QAA manages the Academic Infrastructure – the set of reference tools which institutions use for setting and maintaining both quality and standards (comprising, in England, the higher education qualifications framework, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications, and the Code of Practice). The QAA is reviewing the Academic Infrastructure to make sure that it, and each of its component parts, remain fit for purpose. This is an extremely important opportunity to ensure that the Academic Infrastructure continues to make a significant contribution to maintaining and enhancing standards as our higher education system continues to evolve and grow.

89. External examiners make a key contribution towards comparability of standards across the sector. External examining arrangements were addressed by the QAA's thematic review report and further recommendations are included in the report of the Quality sub-committee of HEFCE's Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee. The Government welcomes the thorough review of external examining arrangements which the sector has announced and will want to be kept fully in touch with its progress.

90. The Government agrees that the QAA's independence is important, and it is indeed currently funded both by subscriptions from institutions and through contracts with the higher education funding bodies.

91. The current cycle of institutional audit ends in 2010/11 and the sector will be consulted from the end of this year on the arrangements which will follow from 2011/12. This is an opportunity which the higher education sector must take to ensure that the new quality assurance system, in whatever form it takes, is accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public facing.

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)

92. The Government believes that variable research has been undertaken in the area of contact and study time in higher education and asked HEFCE to commission work looking at the evidence available. The resulting Centre for Higher Education Research and Information April 2009 report pointed to a weak literature base in this area. At this stage the Government is not convinced of the usefulness of further similar research.

93. The Government is confident of the robustness of the English higher education experience and this is clear in its outcomes—high student and employer satisfaction. One of the conclusions of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information's April 2009 report 'Diversities in the study experience of students and in the time devoted to it' was that "too much should not be attributed to relatively small differences between countries in hours devoted to study".

94. See also the Government's response to recommendation 32.

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)

95. The Government is keen to continue to encourage and incentivise high quality teaching and learning but does not believe there is evidence to justify the cost and disruption of a return to the system of teaching quality assessment. The Government does, however, believe that under the new quality assurance systems, to be introduced from 2011/12, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) should be asked to enquire into, and report on issues including assessment, student support and teaching. QAA's existing practice is to make public its findings following institutional audit and to require action plans where needed. QAA also supports institutions in developing and enhancing the management of their quality and standards. QAA's '*Outcomes from institutional audit*' papers, for example, are thematic briefings based on analysis of QAA audit reports, identifying emerging issues and areas of good practice.

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)

96. The Government rejects this recommendation. The Government understands the thinking that lies behind it. But a review of powers to award taught degrees is, unavoidably, a prolonged and intensive process. To require such a process for all universities would be to create a large new overhead both for individual institutions and for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA's institutional audits are capable of providing sufficiently powerful controls over quality, especially when public funding can be withheld as a result of audit findings. This recommendation would be a costly and disproportionate response when there are already sufficiently powerful funding sanctions in place in response to audit.

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)

97. The Quality Assurance Agency's existing Cause for Concern procedure can already be instigated by external examiners, members of the public, and by the Government. HEFCE's recently published policy (1 September 2009) for addressing unsatisfactory quality in institutions, will trigger a series of possible steps which could lead, as a last resort, to HEFCE's withdrawal of funding.

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)

98. The Quality Assurance Agency's Cause for Concern policy provides for 'whistle-blowing' by institutional staff, provided that claims are accompanied by substantiating documentary evidence. Institutions typically have their own 'whistle-blowing' policies and processes. The Government believes that the review of external examining arrangements

announced by the sector should include independent recourse for External Examiners who have unresolved concerns about an institution's academic standards.

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)

99. The Government rejects this recommendation. We are satisfied with the definition of roles and responsibilities between the Government, the Funding Council and individual institutions. It is consistent with that autonomy that Government sets out certain conditions for the public funding that universities receive and in those other areas where there is a national interest (including quality) where there should be proportionate regulation.

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 256)

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)

100. The Government is not clear that further studies or work on the degree classification system would be appropriate or cost-effective at this time. The sector groups chaired by Professor Burgess have carried out a number of studies associated with degree classification, informed by which, the sector is currently piloting the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) which will provide a more detailed academic record for students alongside their overall degree classification. The Government will consider the need for any further study or work to support the degree classification system once the outcome of the pilot is known.

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)

101. One of the precepts of the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) *'Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education'* (Section 6 – Assessment of students) is that institutions publicise and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable. In institutional audit the QAA looks at use of the Academic Infrastructure, of which the Code of Practice is a part.

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)

102. The Government agrees that the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) and the current degree classification system should initially run in parallel, and that is the intention. The length of time will be subject to the outcome of the pilot.

103. The sector group overseeing the development of the HEAR is considering whether non-academic achievements could be incorporated. The Government's view is that the primary purpose of the HEAR must continue to be to record academic achievement while developing the record of some new non-academic achievements which have the support of employers and students.

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)

104. The Government agrees in principle with the need for external examiner arrangements to be reviewed to ensure their continuing effectiveness in contributing to consistency of standards across institutions. The Government welcomes the sector's recent announcement to undertake this review (10 September 2009 – UUK Conference). The Government's response to recommendations 77–81 refers to the fact that the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) thematic review report has already made recommendations for improvements to external examining arrangements, and further recommendations are made in the Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee report. The sector has also already announced plans to review external examining arrangements. Such a review must consider how the current arrangements can be improved and ensure that they are fit to meet future demand.

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)

105. Plagiarism is a serious problem, not only in higher education and not only in England. It is a problem which the higher education sector takes very seriously and institutions have clear policies in place to deal with plagiarism. The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Code of Practice recommends that students should be provided with information and guidance about plagiarism and institutional audit will check that guidance is clear and appropriate. Institutions are supported by the Higher Education Academy/Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Academic Integrity Service. The Government expects the sector to follow up recommendations about dealing with

plagiarism in HEFCE's Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee report and Ministers will want to be kept in touch. The Government's view is that the responsibility for dealing with student breaches of higher education institutions' policies on plagiarism rests with the institutions themselves. The work that institutions undertake (with the help of the Higher Education Academy and JISC) to inform and communicate to students the core principles of academic and self-integrity to manage any breaches of their disciplinary arrangements, offers the best route to tackling plagiarism.

106. It would be for a court to decide whether someone is criminally liable. Whether a student and/or 'writing service' would be deemed by a court to have committed an offence would depend on the individual circumstances of the case. The disclaimers used by such services may be an important factor in such a decision.

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)

107. This is a matter for the institution concerned, but see also paragraph 98.

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)

108. The Government agrees that the sector needs to develop greater openness and transparency in relation to academic quality and standards and the safeguarding of the student experience. There are opportunities for the sector to do that as it responds to the forthcoming consultation on the quality assurance processes that will succeed the current institutional audit cycle (which ends in the academic year 2010/11). The sector bodies involved in preparing the consultation, to be launched in December 2009, are committed to a quality assurance system which is accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public facing. They are well aware of the need to tackle concerns about quality and standards and make real changes to improve the student experience and the reputation of higher education.

109. See also paragraph 104.

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)

110. A strong interest in evidence and research about higher education is self-evident in the sector and the Government also takes seriously its role in supporting research on a wide variety of higher education issues. The Government has a commitment to evidence-based policy and works actively with analysts and researchers both inside Government and in the wider community.

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)

111. The Government agrees that the sector could better explain how comparable standards are maintained, but does not believe that diversity equals inconsistency. The Government is quite clear that while degrees differ by discipline and purpose they are all designed to reach a threshold standard. This is achieved and demonstrated by reference to

the Academic Infrastructure, especially to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and the subject benchmark statements and through the use of external examiners. Assurance is provided through the audit process.

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)

112. The Government agrees that the question of standards is a very important one, and one which the sector is already addressing as it develops a review of quality assurance processes, as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) develops a review of the Academic Infrastructure, and as external examining is reviewed. In addition the Government expects there to be significant amounts of work in response to the findings of the report of the Quality sub-committee of HEFCE's Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee and those of QAA's thematic review report. The Government does not agree that this is the time to establish a new quality and standards agency – that would be a disproportionate response and one which would distract the sector's time and attention away from the actions it is already committed to take and which the Government expects will make a real difference.

113. The Government agrees that a constructive relationship between the QAA and the Higher Education Academy is important and that both organisations have a key role in promoting and enhancing academic quality and standards.

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)

114. The Government agrees that diversity is key to the future success of the higher education sector. So we agree that it will be important to recognise and reward excellence in all its forms.

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 (HC 759)
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 (HC 989)
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 (HC 990)
Eleventh Report	Students and Universities	HC 170-I (HC 991)

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]