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## 8 July 2010

### Information for prospective students is a key element in quality assurance overhaul

The quality of information about higher education will be improved in changes being made to strengthen the method for assuring the quality and standards of higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

Under a revised method, which is being developed by the organisations responsible for quality assurance, providing authoritative and accessible information will be key to the quality assurance process.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is developing a detailed description of how the revised audit method will operate. Changes compared with the current method include:

- greater flexibility so it can respond to issues and concerns as they arise
- clearer assurance to the public that threshold standards are being maintained
- clearer, less technical terms to describe judgements
- a greater concern for addressing public understanding of quality and standards.

QAA will consult in autumn 2010 on the detail of the institutional audit method to operate from 2011-12 for higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland. A separate consultation will be launched by HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE on the types of information that institutions will be required to provide for prospective students – the aim is that this will be subject to a published judgement in due course.

The moves to ensure that students in higher education continue to receive a high quality learning and teaching experience follow a widespread consultation by the four sponsoring bodies: HEFCE, Department for Employment and Learning, UniversitiesUK and GuildHE. The principles and objectives that will apply to the new quality assurance system for higher education from 2011-12 are set out in 'Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland' which has been published today ([Note 1](#)).

The sponsoring bodies say that they are committed to a quality assurance system that is “accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public-facing. We want to tackle concerns about quality and standards and make real changes to improve the student experience and the reputation of higher education.”

Under the revised method student engagement will be central to the quality assurance process, including through the use of student auditors as full members of audit teams.

Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE, said:

'The improvements to audit we are calling for should ensure the national quality assurance system is fit for purpose. HEFCE is committed to working with its partners and the wider higher education community to ensure the reputation of higher education teaching remains world class. It is right that the needs and interests of students and prospective students are brought firmly to the fore.'

Universities and Science Minister, David Willetts MP, said:

'The quality of teaching is a key priority for Government. Our quality assurance system must be fit for the future and aim to improve the student experience. We need a better system that gets more information to prospective students.'

Aaron Porter, NUS President, said:

'Providing accurate information about the quality of university courses is central to improving student decision-making. We welcome the importance that the new quality assurance system places on up-to-date, consistent and reliable information. It is also very encouraging that the principle of "meeting the needs of students" has been placed at the heart of the new quality assurance process.'

Professor Steve Smith, President of Universities UK, said:

'We consulted very widely with students' unions, employers and universities about how quality assurance could be strengthened. Having listened carefully, we are very pleased to be announcing these important improvements. These will make a real difference to all students in English and Northern Irish universities and colleges.'

Professor Ruth Farwell, Vice-Chancellor of Buckinghamshire New University and Chair of GuildHE, said:

'I am delighted that we have been able to agree that the interests of current and prospective students should be put at the heart of the new system for quality assurance.'

Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive of QAA, said:

'We welcome the opportunity to look more closely at the vital information provided by institutions to prospective students, and to make judgements on the quality of that information. We also know that if we are effectively to safeguard the public interest in the quality and standards of higher education, the requirement for providing clear and relevant information also applies to QAA itself. In looking forward to implementing this new method of auditing institutions we are also developing new, more accessible ways of reporting our findings to the public.'

## External examiners

UniversitiesUK and GuildHE are leading a UK- wide review of the external examiner arrangements. This will seek to ensure that the system remains robust by recommending improvements which continue to support academic standards and meet future challenges.

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## Notes

1. See the '[Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland](#)', (HEFCE 2010/17).
2. The [letter from the four sponsoring bodies \(HEFCE, DEL, UUK and GuildHE\) to QAA](#), commissioning the new institutional audit process is also available on the HEFCE web-site.
3. HEFCE, DELNI, GuildHE and UUK consulted between December 2009 and March 2010 on the [future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland](#). That consultation received a total of 169 responses, including the views of professional bodies and student unions.
4. Universities UK has launched a Quality and Standards micro-site, giving an insight into how both are assured at UK universities. The site provides [information on how the system works, FAQs, statistics and updates on the latest media and news stories from the quality field](#).

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