

This response is on behalf of the Engineering Council, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the professional engineering institutions, some of whom may submit their own individual responses.

Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: summary of questions

Question 1

a) How widely recognised is the Academic Infrastructure?

Recognition of the four separate parts and the term 'academic infrastructure' (AI) is probably limited to the academic community. However, some parts of AI, in particular the engineering subject benchmarks and the qualifications descriptors, are regularly used by others such as those in engineering professional engineering institutions who are involved in the accreditation of engineering degrees and this is likely to be the case in other disciplines subject to PSRB scrutiny. The fact that the separate components are inter-related and between them form the academic infrastructure is probably less widely recognised.

All audiences would benefit from a more precise term than AI, which in its current form suggests all HEI organisational structures together with their estates infrastructure. Ideally, the term would better describe what the tools do, and would cover quality and standards. The word 'academic' is best avoided since it covers research and scholarship, neither of which seems to feature in the discussion paper.

b) Who should be the audience(s) for the Academic Infrastructure?

The primary audience should be HEIs, for use when planning the provision of academic programmes. Other key audiences for particular elements of the AI, as mentioned above, are those involved in professional body accreditation of HE programmes. In engineering, this includes representatives from the professional engineering institutions and from industry as well as academics. Increasing engagement of employers with higher education, including direct employer provision, means that they must form part of the audience as well.

c) What should be the primary purpose of the Academic Infrastructure?

A tool for UK HE to use when planning provision

A means by which the UK demonstrates its threshold standards, nationally and internationally

A basis for the development of internal and external audit systems

d) Does the Academic Infrastructure provide an adequate basis for the comparison of academic standards between institutions and between academic disciplines?

AI provides a basis for the comparability of threshold standards and the achievement of the particular award (bachelor's, master's etc).

Question 2

a) How should the Academic Infrastructure be better connected to quality assurance and enhancement activities?

There could be more explicit reference to enhancement and encouragement for provision that is innovative and responsive.

b) What further developments are needed?

Consideration could be given to distinguishing more clearly within the AI between compliance, prescription and guidance. For example, 'code of practice' implies adherence, however its published status is non-statutory. It is probably more appropriately described as guidance with supporting case studies.

Question 3

a) Have the qualifications frameworks met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

Within the engineering sector, the qualifications frameworks have been useful in providing a shared understanding. They are referred to as key reference points for the accreditation of bachelor's, honours and master's degrees in engineering.

b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

They are appropriate in setting standards.

Maintaining standards requires more than simply referring to a particular level descriptor. There might be advantages in making more explicit the link between the qualifications frameworks and information in the Code of Practice.

c) What further developments are needed?

No comment

Question 4

a) Have the subject benchmark statements met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

Broadly, yes. An important development in 2006 was the adoption by QAA of the Engineering Council's UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC) as the subject benchmark for engineering. This development has helped to strengthen the case for academic accreditation, and most UK engineering degrees are put forward for accreditation.

Accreditation is a mark of assurance that an engineering programme meets the standards set by the profession, and therefore ensures the relevance of HE provision, for the benefit of students, employers and society as a whole. Importantly, by focussing on engineering programmes, accreditation also provides subject-level information that was lost from QAA's previous academic review model.

The alignment of the QAA benchmark with the engineering profession's requirements was strongly supported by the academic community and has served the profession and academia well. It reduces the bureaucratic burden on universities, and has been praised by the HE Regulatory Review group as demonstrating good practice.

The focus on learning outcomes has enabled the development of diverse provision whilst ensuring that tomorrow's engineers have the required skills, knowledge and understanding. Recently this has led to the development by the Engineering Council, working with universities and professional engineering institutions, of innovative and flexible programmes that integrate learning in the workplace, to bachelors or masters level, with supervised work-based professional development.

Through its accreditation activity, the Engineering Council and its licensed professional engineering institutions play an important role in demonstrating to society that systems are in place to set appropriate standards, and that sector-specific standards are being met.

b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

For engineering degrees, yes. The UK-SPEC standards (benchmark statements) are used to set the output standards and they are used during the design of degree programmes and their accreditation. Accredited status carries a currency nationally and internationally.

The accreditation process also has built into it a focus on sharing practice that is notable or innovative.

c) What further developments are needed?

There is some evidence that although the benchmark statements are not intended to be prescriptive, universities may not be taking full advantage of their inherent flexibility. Further support to encourage universities to do so should be considered.

The Engineering Council and its licensed professional engineering institutions play an important role in demonstrating to society that systems are in place to set appropriate standards, and that sector-specific standards are being met. **Whilst those of us working in the field understand the importance of PSRB activity in complementing QAA's audit activity, this is not necessarily recognised by, for example, parents, employers, students and the media. We would welcome more explicit acknowledgment of the contribution of PSRB accreditation activity in assuring quality and standards.**

Question 5

a) Have programme specifications met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

A stated aim is the use of these by PSRBs that accredit HE programmes. We can confirm that programme specifications are always referred to during the process of engineering degree accreditation and that the visiting panels find them useful.

b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

No comment

c) What further developments are needed?

Ensuring their relevance to multi-disciplinary programmes and when threads (such as ethics, sustainability) are embedded within curricula.

Question 6

a) Has the *Code of practice* met its original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

We routinely refer to some sections of the Code that are relevant to our accreditation work and found these to be accessible and useful. Their presentation as separate sections, each with a specific focus, is welcome.

b) Are the ways in which it is currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

We do not have first-hand information about how the code is used. However, we would support any activity directed towards encouraging universities to make full use of the guidance.

c) What further developments are needed?

As mentioned, clarifying the status of the Code, which is currently described as good practice.

As some of the Code relates to programmes rather than institutions, it may form part of the evidence submitted to PSRBs for the purposes of accreditation. It is not clear if QAA is making assumptions that PSRBs are covering certain elements.

Question 7

What do you think the future of the Academic Infrastructure should be?

The component parts of the AI have generally served higher education and its stakeholders well and we do not recommend major change although more should be done to bring out the interconnected nature of the different elements. Any future development must help to foster a culture of continuous quality enhancement by HEIs and help to ensure that quality assurance is seen as a developmental process and not a wholly judgemental one.

It should clearly articulate comparability with international standards.

Consideration should be given to strengthening the references within the documentation to PSRB requirements, and highlighting these more explicitly. This would demonstrate to communities outside of academia that the stated requirements for student achievement have currency.

Whilst professional bodies are encouraged to reduce the bureaucratic burden on HE by making use of QAA's reports and data, it is not clear to what extent QAA uses PSRB accreditation reports and/or related data. We would welcome a discussion about this and any other opportunities for mutual benefit.

Attention should be devoted to ensuring that the public, and especially employers and the media, are aware that rigorous frameworks exist, are adhered to and action taken when standards fall short. Making the fine detail accessible to the public may not be necessary, unless there is clear evidence that this is what the public wishes. The recent THE University Lifestyle Survey 2010 revealed that few students rated information from the QAA as important, with most interest being in knowing about what their course would qualify them to do.

However brief your response, please send your replies by Friday 7 May 2010 to:

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