

IES and QAAHE An Agenda for Quality

Introduction

The Institution of Environmental Sciences (IES) offers the following initial comments on the QAAHE Consultative paper: 'An Agenda for Quality, as published in the March 1998 Issue of Higher Quality. The short deadline (May 22) and the detail of the paper precluded full dissemination and discussion by the IES amongst its members and constituent committees.

The IES has existed as a professional body for over 25 years. It serves the professional needs of practitioners and academics working in the interdisciplinary study of the environment. The IES considers itself to be the leading body nationally in this capacity and claims distinctiveness through its interdisciplinary emphasis. It has been involved in the accreditation of courses at sub-degrees, degree and first degree standards for 6 years; this activity is growing. It also publishes a bi-monthly journal on articles and news items relevant for its membership.

General

The IES welcomes the opportunities to respond to the QAA paper and would have welcomed a fuller opportunity for discussion. The observations made are, accordingly, initial and brief based upon one full day's specially convened workshop at the IES headquarters on May 6th, 1998 at which a selected group of interested persons were addressed by the QAA Director for Programme Review.

The IES feels that the issue of academic development and professional competence are sometimes confused in the paper. Their interrelationships raise very profound practical issues as the IES has found over the last 25 years in its institutional work. It is not confident if the terms used in the paper 'Standards, quality, threshold.' are fully used or perceived in the same ways; nor if they are as distinguishable and as measurable as the QAA indicates. There appears to be some problematic contradictions in trying to define generic skills for specific fields. If they are generic, can they be specific? Nevertheless, the IES agrees on the need to continue to define benchmarks for ES.

Despite the short time scale, the complexity and importance of the issues raised, IES wishes to cooperate fully with the QAA in the progress of its work, and invites further dialogue out of these initial findings.

The IES supports the QAA in the encouragement of diversity and creativity in the design and delivery of courses. The IES is already refining its own accreditation criteria to make more explicit criteria consistent with the QAA's thinking on what it anticipates graduates in Environmental Sciences should know and should be able to do. The IES is using the QAA template to collate feedback from a wider sample of its members in the next month. The IES would be interested in making this information available to the QAA if it is considering further piloting beyond the 3 disciplinary areas already identified. The IES believes the wider boundaries of its academic and professional field will enable the QAA to test its models in a more interdisciplinary context.

The IES notes that the QAA document is determined by the Dearing Report and questions whether some of the elements e.g. Registered External Examiners (REE) are achievable. The IES, therefore, feels that the QAA should proceed with caution on the REE issue. The IES believes the convergence of national institutional and professional assessments are desirable to reduce existing duplication and burden. The IES has accumulated considerable recent experience of standards and quality through its accreditation process and through the experience of its panels.

The concept of training of REE's is sensible but the time and methods need more debate. Conflict of interest between REE's and programmes is a serious danger depending on the model used. REE's should be currently active in T & L and a register would be valuable.

The IES's present service to HE Institutions with Environmental Science programmes is effected usually simultaneously with other review bodies and utilises the same documentation. The IES believes its experience and success in this area could be valuable to the QAA in future systems. The IES is happy to cooperate with the QAA over the question of external examiners via its existing and expanding panel of experts.

The IES functions in a wide interdisciplinary field rather than in a narrow disciplinary specialism. The subject placing of Environmental Science with Earth Science and Geologically related fields is only a part of its overall academic and professional competence. The IES is uncertain about the appropriateness of the proposed traditional divisions which are discipline based and not interdisciplinary. Environmental Science in the proposed system is scattered over 3 or more 'subject areas.' The proposed subject divisions appear arbitrary and variable. Comparison of ES programmes are, accordingly, problematic (one reason for the IES's coolness to the concept of league tables) if not flawed.

Summary

The IES adopts a positive and pro-active stance over the QAA's Consultative Paper. In particular, it offers the QAA a different model for benchmarking and standards based on a wider interdisciplinary framework. It also possesses considerable experience in current educational practice through its accreditation systems and offers this expertise as a basis for further dialogue with the QAAHE.

The IES needs more time to consider in detail the development of specific benchmarking and thresholds for its variety of courses. It is using Annex A to conduct a wider survey of its members and is happy to make these findings available to the QAA in due course.

The IES has reservations about some of the details underpinning the REE system, the principle of ranking programmes of different nature, the divisions and placing of Environmental Science, and the practicalities of benchmarking.

This Initial report will be made available to IES Council and Education Committee members for June 17th 1998. Any queries or responses should be directed to the IES Hon. Secretary at the address given in time for this date if possible.