

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland

Response on behalf of the Society for General Microbiology

Q1 Agree

Q2 Agree

Comments: It is appropriate that institutions should be accountable for their performance and ensure that it meets national expectations. However, there needs to be recognition that quality is also influenced by external factors outside of the control of individual HEIs (e.g. funding levels). For a science subject like microbiology, funding levels impact on the amount of practical teaching, which would be an important quality indicator.

It is critical that higher education institutions (HEIs) retain their autonomy. Any form of a national curriculum for HEIs must be resisted although benchmarks for assessing standards are welcomed.

Q3 Agree

Comments: There must be a stronger commitment to not increase (and preferably decrease) the overall demand on the HEIs, rather than just 'as far as reasonably possible' (paragraph 38e).

Q4 Agree

Comments: Assuring maintenance of standards across institutions is commendable, but maintenance of standards themselves must also be assured. Otherwise standards are lowered in general and this may be seen as giving into "consumer demands."

Q5 Strongly agree

Q6 Agree

Q7 Agree

Comments: The agreed data set must be meaningful. The data produced by the National Student Survey are widely acknowledged as being flawed and open to manipulation by individual institutions. Over-reliance on these would undermine the value of any judgment. More opportunity for staff response would be welcomed.

Data on contact hours have to be interpreted in the context of the learning and teaching strategy; for example, it would not necessarily be desirable to 'reward' strategies with high contact hours if they discourage the use of innovative student-centred teaching. Differences in disciplines also need to be appreciated. In science subjects including microbiology, data on the quantity and quality of practical lab-based teaching would be of value.

If there is data that is not quality-assured, for example rankings in newspapers, an official statement from the institution may be required to put the data in context or perspective.

Q8 Strongly agree

Comments: Enhanced clarity to enable public debate and scrutiny is strongly supported.

Q9 Agree

Q10

Comments: External examining, although part of a separate consultation, is the most critical feature for underpinning the maintenance and comparability of standards. There are concerns in the sector about external examiner recruitment and quality. Learned societies may be well positioned to suggest appropriate participants to be independent reviewers

Feedback should be sought from employers from all sectors to help assess whether new graduates are fit for their purpose. This will be of more use than statistics referring to employment destinations of recent graduates.