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Accreditation and related regulatory matters in the UK

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1 United Kingdom

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1.1 UK Higher Education

There are currently nearly 2 million students studying in the UK's 167 higher education institutions. This reflects substantial growth and diversification during the 1990s. Of the more than 160 institutions, 132 are in England of which 77 are universities, 14 are general colleges and 41 are specialist colleges, e.g. in music or art and design. There are 14 universities in Scotland and four higher education colleges. Wales has a federal university with eight constituent colleges, one other university and four colleges. Northern Ireland has two universities. The UK universities include the former polytechnics and some higher education colleges 'upgraded' to university status in 1992/3. Of the two million students studying in UK higher education in 2000/2001, 1.5 million were undergraduates (mainly bachelors programmes) of whom just over one million studied full-time. Of nearly half a million postgraduate students, 172,000 were full-time and 276,000 were part-time. Over 100,000 of the postgraduate students were from overseas. Participation of the age cohort stands at 43% and the government target is to reach at least 50% by 2012.

The status of UK universities is of private institutions that are funded substantially by public funds. (Only the small University of Buckingham is fully private.) As such they have traditionally enjoyed high degrees of institutional autonomy with funding being the major regulatory tool available to government. Other higher education institutions have traditionally had closer ties with local tiers of government although these were loosened in the late 1980s as part of the more general Thatcherite attack on local government. The post 1992 universities (former polytechnics) have governing bodies that must accord with certain statutory requirements but these, as with the councils of the older pre-1992 universities, are self-reproducing and not subject to any direct state control. Additionally, more than 10% of higher education is conducted in colleges that are formally part of the 'further education' system. This is the terminology used to refer to post-school education below the level of higher education. But many colleges contain a mixture of 'further' and 'higher'.

The main degree types are the 3 or 4 year bachelor's degree (the normal first degree), the masters degree and the PhD. There are differences in Scotland (see below). Masters degrees have typically been of two sorts: the one year 'taught' masters degree and the two years 'research' masters degree. The doctorate would normally be 3 years following a bachelor's degree although initial registration for a masters would be the normal route to a doctorate. These are all full-time durations and all degrees are also available by part-time study over longer periods. In Scotland, reflecting a different education system at school level and the fact that traditionally Scottish students entered higher education a year younger than those elsewhere in the UK. Initial study of four years to an honours bachelors degree has been the norm although there is also a three year 'ordinary' bachelor's degree. This contrasts with the 'honours' bachelor's degree after three years in other parts of the UK. The honours classification of the UK bachelor's degree is an important element as it is a crucial indicator of academic achievement and subsequent employment opportunities. Recently, considerable emphasis has been given to a new two-year qualification: the Foundation degree. Two year higher education qualifications are not entirely new. Higher National Diplomas and

Certificates have existed for a long time as has a two-year Diploma in Higher Education. Most of these qualifications have a vocational emphasis and are meant to provide direct routes into employment as well as entry routes into higher level programmes. An attempt to bring a greater degree of order into the qualifications structure has seen the creation of the 'national qualifications frameworks' (see section 2.5).

It is important to emphasise that matters of programme type and content are left to the judgements of individual institutions although attempts to introduce some degree of conformity have recently been made with the introduction of 'subject benchmarks'. That said, programmes may be organised along academic subject lines or professional/vocational lines. A very common development during the 1990s was the introduction of modular degree programmes (along with semesterisation) that afforded individual students considerable choice over what to study and the possibility of constructing unique programmes reflecting personal interests and aptitudes. There may be a shift away from this approach following criticisms of its consequences for both the academic and the social aspects of the student experience.

Around 60% of students go straight into the labour market after the bachelor's degree and approximately 7% are unemployed or seeking further study or training. Many of the rest take postgraduate courses of one sort or another. Particularly common are diplomas linked to entry to professions such as teaching or social work where possession of a diploma is a pre-requisite for entry. Other postgraduate courses (e.g. in areas such as law, accountancy and engineering) are linked to the entry requirements of particular professional and statutory bodies (PSBs). Some would regard these courses as postgraduate 'in time' rather than postgraduate 'in level'. Other postgraduate courses may have less clear labour market links but may still possess considerable vocational relevance, for example courses in information technology or in aspects of business management. There is very little long-term unemployment of graduates although the transition from higher education into suitable graduate-level employment can take a few years for some. The higher education—labour market linkage in the labour market is a looser one in the UK than in many European countries. Many labour market opportunities for graduates are not regulated by specific qualification requirements and employers regard degrees as evidence about the broad levels of ability and competence of the holders rather than a specific occupational competence. That said, there has been considerable emphasis in recent years on making graduates 'more employable' through a variety of curriculum and other initiatives.

As stated above, UK higher education institutions have traditionally enjoyed much greater autonomy from the state that has been common in other parts of Europe. It follows therefore that considerable powers rest with their governing bodies. These differ between the old (pre 1992) and new (post 1992) universities. In the case of the old universities, the constitution of the governing body or council is defined in the university's Charter and Statutes. These differ between institutions. The University Commissioners (a government body) reviewed these around 1990 and produced a model statute. The aim was to remove excessive variation between university governing bodies on matters such as size, powers, membership etc. But its recommendations were only advisory. One important symbolic (and rarely practical) aspect of old university statutes is the role of the 'visitor' (often the Queen). The visitor is the ultimate authority on matters of complaint and appeal by members (staff and students) of the university.

In new universities, the authority of the visitor is vested in the governing body itself, i.e. they must resolve matters of appeal and complaint within the university. (There may of course be ultimate recourse to a court of law.) The powers and composition of the governing bodies of new universities were defined in the 1992 Education Act, building on the 1988 Act which gave the former 'public' local authority run polytechnics the status of independent (private) corporations. A major difference between them and the pre-1992 universities lies in the

absence of senates, or bodies of equivalent authority, in the latter. The equivalent advisory boards of new universities ultimately only have advisory status.

However, most people working in higher education would claim that it has been steadily eroded in recent years. The introduction of new national quality assurance arrangements is widely considered to be an important aspect of that erosion. Greater accountability in state funding arrangements would be another. Although high levels of institutional autonomy have been a traditional feature of higher education in the UK, this should not be confused with the autonomy of the individual academic. While this is also generally regarded as high, it is also the case that institutional power is greater than in many HE systems, and the individual professor will be constrained by the collegial, and increasingly managerial, authority of his/her institution.

1.2 Accreditation and Other Schemes

1.2.1 Accreditation

‘Accreditation’ is not a widely used term in UK higher education, being mainly associated with the work of (some of) the professional bodies and (some of) the university arrangements for approving courses in non-university institutions without their own powers to award degrees. Professional bodies evaluate programmes in their particular fields and this leads to an approval by the professional body. This approval relates to the labour market status of the qualification awarded, in particular whether a ‘licence to practice’ is involved, in whole or in part. It does not relate to the programme itself. Non-university institutions without the power to award their own degrees must seek ‘validation’ from a university or other degree-awarding institution. Universities are both responsible for the evaluation and the subsequent formal approval of their own degrees. These responsibilities and evaluations by individual universities also extend to the degrees of any higher education colleges or other organisations which prepare students for the degrees of the ‘accrediting’ or ‘validating’ (the more commonly used term) university. Thus, university x will review the programmes in college y prior to their formal approval by the university.

1.2.1.1 Accreditation of Programmes by Professional and Statutory Bodies (PSBs)

Professional and statutory bodies are organisations that approve or recognise specific programmes which lead to a professional qualification or licence to practise. Many such bodies receive their authority from the Crown on the advice of the Privy Council, which may also be involved in other matters such as the approval of regulations. Accreditation of programmes of study that lead to a professional title (for example, law, medicine and the various branches of engineering) is carried out by PSBs. Accreditation is intended to ensure that a programme of study provides some, or all, of the competencies needed for professional practice. This leads to an approval decision and recognition that in some cases carries statutory weight. However, it is important to understand that this does not affect the course’s right to exist. The university’s right to offer courses as it thinks fit is not limited.

Qualifications awarded to students on completion of courses not recognised by the appropriate professional body might well be of limited value in the labour market but the situation varies between occupational areas. Such a qualification (i.e. not recognised by the professional body) might well be sought after, especially if it was awarded by a prestigious university.

PSBs have a number of roles which will vary according to the individual PSB. Among the roles are the following:

- specifying the nature of the education and training required for entry to the profession
- assessing required knowledge, competence and values
- ensuring the suitability of providers of professional education and training

- specifying continuous professional development.

PSBs will vary in terms of their involvement in higher education and the accreditation of programmes of study. Most PSBs accredit programmes of study while others, to a much lesser extent, will accredit centres or schools of higher education institutions.

PSBs are concerned with curriculum content of both initial and professional education and training. Many, however, will also take into account the wider institutional environment, such as resources and internal quality assurance processes. Minimum standards are specified at the initial level whereas more detailed specifications are made at the professional level. Over the last decade or so there has been a growing tendency for PSBs to delegate the provision of ‘suitable’ initial level education to higher education institutions. However, most will undertake initial accreditation visits (while a minority will limit their involvement to desk exercises). Re-accreditation reviews take place from anything between two to 10 years depending on the PSB, although the common time frame is five yearly. Most reviews take the form of a visit and these make use of peer review procedures.

Professional bodies are different from statutory bodies. Statutory bodies (e.g., General Medical Council and English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting) are established by the government, mostly through statute, to exercise control over a particular profession. Unlike professional bodies (e.g., the Royal Institute of British Architects), they do not offer membership to professional practitioners, although some maintain a register of practitioners. Professional bodies are of two sorts: ‘those for which membership is compulsory for practice within the profession (such as solicitors) and those where membership is advantageous but where it is possible to practice without being a member of the professional body (such as electrical engineers)’. Professional bodies have authority to withdraw accreditation whereas statutory bodies must recommend to the Privy Council that a qualification from a higher education institution should no longer be registered.

In the recent past, some PSBs conducted their reviews in conjunction with subject review undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The recent changes in QAA procedures from subject review to institutional audit (see section 2.5) imply that some PSBs that relied on QAA subject review will now need to involve themselves in their own review visits. What form this will take remains to be seen—the following statement was made in a HEFCE document regarding the new arrangements:

It will be for each PSB to determine, in consultation with higher education institutions and the QAA, whether it undertakes such reviews separately from the arrangements covered by this paper, or as reviews undertaken jointly with the QAA. Opportunities for collaborative arrangements between individual PSBs and the QAA will continue to be explored and encouraged. Where such reviews are conducted in accordance with the QAA method, they could form part of—rather than being undertaken in addition to—other separate reviews.

The approach taken to accreditation varies from PSB to PSB. Two examples are provided below, one for law and the other for engineering.

The Law Profession

The law profession comprises two separate bodies, one for solicitors and the other for barristers. Different bodies represent the different countries of the UK reflecting the differences in the legal systems. In England and Wales, the *solicitors*’ professional body is the Law Society; in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the professional bodies are separate but take the same name. The *barristers*’ professional body is the General Council of the Bar and there are separate bodies for England and Wales, and Northern Ireland; in Scotland it is known as the Faculty of Advocates. The professions are responsible for laying down the qualification

regulations governing those seeking to qualify as a solicitor or barrister. The following sections describe the system operating in England and Wales.

To qualify as a solicitor or barrister, there are two stages: i) the academic stage and ii) the vocational stage¹. One of the main routes for completing the academic stage is through the law degree where the ‘seven foundations of legal knowledge’ must be studied and passed. (The other routes are via a non-law degree supplemented by the Common Professional Examination or a Postgraduate Diploma in Law, and the non-graduate route.) The law degree must be of a standard, which has been approved by The Law Society.

The Law Society and Bar Council act jointly in respect of the initial or academic stage of training. In a joint statement of 1999 (effective from 2001), the two bodies will recognise a programme of study as satisfying the requirements of the academic stage, if a number of conditions are met by a higher education institution. These conditions include the following

- are adequate learning resources provided
- does the institution have degree awarding powers conferred by the Privy Council
- do the standards of achievement expected of students conform to or exceed the QAA benchmark statement for law
- are the external examiners satisfied by the programme of study.

In addition, information must be supplied by the institution to the professional bodies about the programme to permit a visit to discuss the programme with the institutional representatives, the programme team and the students. Recognition can be withdrawn from a programme that fails to comply with the conditions set out in the joint statement of minimum standards prescribed by QAA.

Engineering Council

The Engineering Council (EC) is a UK-wide organisation and promotes and regulates the engineering profession in the UK and is responsible for the Register of Chartered Engineers. The EC is established through a Charter and has Bye-Laws which set out its governance and obligations. Regulation of the profession is achieved through the professional ‘Engineering Institutions’, of which there are 35 (e.g., civil, mechanical, structural etc). Engineering Institutions undertake assessments of individuals and of education and training programmes in higher education institutions.

The Institutions, subject to the licenses they hold from the EC, may place individuals on the Register. Entry to the Register means satisfying the appropriate membership requirements; these are determined through the EC’s Standards and Routes to Registration whose application by the Engineering Institutions is regularly audited by the EC. Registration requires a satisfactory educational base (preferably through an accredited course), initial professional development and a professional review. This paper is concerned with the educational base.

To become a Chartered Engineer (CEng) or member of another professional Engineering Institution, engineering students are required to follow a framework of educational preparation—the educational base—as defined by the EC. The requirements for CEng are:

- The four year full-time undergraduate programme (MEng) fully accredited for CEng
- The three year full-time undergraduate programme (BEng) accredited for CEng **plus** an accredited or approved ‘Matching Section’ (one year full-time or equivalent) to achieve equivalence with MEng graduates.

¹ The vocational stage comprises the Bar Vocational Course for barristers and the Legal Practice Course for solicitors. Both are one year full-time or two part-time. The purposes of the courses are to prepare trainees for practical experience in the areas of law and for the more specialised training in the year long ‘pupillage’ for barristers and the training contract with a firm of solicitors.

The Engineering Council normally licenses the Institutions to accredit or approve programmes of study leading to BEng or MEng qualifications. *Accreditation* involves ‘periodic quality audit’ through a peer review process comprising a panel made up of members of academe and industry. The process involves scrutiny of documentation and a visit to the higher education institution. The panel will focus on entry to the programme, the process of teaching and learning, resources, the assessment strategy and the outcomes achieved. *Approval* processes relate to educational provision which is short of full accreditation such as Matching Sections. Accreditation and approval are undertaken in recognition that the processes rely principally upon the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions.

A programme of study should only require one accreditation visit either by one or more professional engineering institution. Amongst other things, the Engineering Institutions are responsible for

- Selecting and training members of accreditation panels
- The constitution of panels
- The form of submission from the higher education institution seeking accreditation of its programme(s)
- The criteria against which an accreditation judgment will be made.

Accreditation judgements are valid for five years when ‘further consideration’ is required. This can take the form of a formal re-accreditation process, an arrangement for continuing periodic audit and review, or evidence obtained by other bodies—it is up to the higher education institution to decide.

1.2.1.2 University Accreditation of Higher Education Outside the University

Partnership arrangements between higher education institutions and between higher education institutions and public or private non-academic organisations, both in the UK and overseas, have been developing since the 1980s. They are seen as providing a means of extending opportunities for large numbers of students. Arrangements will vary, but the main partners will be the awarding institution (i.e., with degree awarding powers) and the providing institution or organisation (i.e., providing the higher education programme, but without degree awarding powers). In all cases, accreditation (or validation, terminology varies between universities) is the result of an evaluation process conducted by peer review.

The awarding institution is responsible for the quality and standards of all the awards that are granted in that institution’s name. Partnership arrangements are subject to institutional audit by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the quality assurance body for the UK (see below). The QAA will examine i) the way in which the institution manages the quality of programmes offered in its name by a partner organisation, and ii) the ways it ensures that the academic standards of its awards gained through study with partner organisations are the same as those gained through study with the institution itself. If the partnership is overseas or is on a large scale, the Agency has in the past undertaken separate reviews to the institutional audit. The QAA’s code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education includes a section on ‘collaborative provision’—the term used by QAA for such partnerships. The code outlines a set of precepts (key issues) with accompanying guidance. The code is meant to cover various forms of collaborative provision, although the word ‘collaborative’ is not defined more widely than those arrangements ‘involving the provision of programmes of study and the granting of awards and qualifications’. The code comprises 38 precepts arranged around the following headings

- Responsibility for, and equivalence of, academic standards
- Policies, procedures and information
- Selecting a partner organisation

- Written agreements
- Agreements with agents (a third party employed by the awarding institution to facilitate a collaborative arrangement)
- Assuring academic standards and the quality of programmes and awards
- Assessment requirements
- External examining
- Certificates and transcripts
- Information for students
- Publicity and marketing

Arrangements for accreditation vary within the above framework between institutions. Some colleges and organisations receive accreditation from several universities, relating to different programmes. Below are two examples of university accreditation arrangements. The first, the Open University, is the largest but not a typical accreditor. The second, the University of Sussex, is more typical of university accrediting.

Accreditation by the Open University

An organisation that wishes to offer a programme of study leading to a validated² award of the Open University (OU), must first be approved at institutional level as being suitable to do so—this process is called ‘accreditation’. To become accredited an organisation must meet a set of principles which cover the following:

- A suitable environment
- Independence of institutional ownership from the exercise of academic authority
- Clear academic structures
- An effective quality assurance system
- A challenging learning environment
- Relationships with the wider academic community.

Organisations will be required to show how they meet these principles through documentary evidence—the ‘submission’. Often the validation of a programme of study will be combined with the institutional accreditation. The process involves initial dialogue between the OU and the organisation which may or may not lead to a formal submission for accreditation. Once the formal submission has been received, a visit will be made by a panel of expert advisors with knowledge of quality assurance, senior management and teaching in higher education (these are drawn from across the higher education sector rather than from its own academics). The purpose of the visit is to explore and clarify the information provided in the documentary evidence. A report is produced which, if successful, will recommend accreditation and an Accreditation Agreement will then be negotiated. This agreement will outline responsibility for the validation and review of programmes, the approval of external examiners, maintenance of quality assurance records, and the provision of information to the OU. All accredited institutions and their programmes are re-accredited or re-validated within six years. However, peer review panels may limit approval to a shorter term - whatever they deem appropriate. Additionally, an interim review to follow up a limited agenda of issues, often carried out by a smaller panel comprising the chair and an officer from the University, is sometimes required.

² ‘Validation’ is the process by which the programmes of study of accredited organisations are approved to lead to an OU award.

Accreditation by the University of Sussex

The University of Sussex has a set of criteria and procedures for partner institutions that wish to seek accredited status. Through accredited status, the University recognises the partner institution's own internal processes for the approval of new programmes of study leading to an award of the University and the review and modification of existing programmes leading to an award. In other words, unlike the OU, the University of Sussex, once accredited status is conferred, will not conduct validation or re-validation events, but will delegate authority for the approval of the curriculum to the partner institution. However, the University will remain responsible for the academic standards of all awards granted in its name.

To become accredited, a partner institution must meet a number of criteria:

- Have a commitment to quality assurance and operate an effective system
- Operate as a self-critical academic community
- Have experience of delivering programmes leading to a University of Sussex award
- Understand and comply with the University's policies and practices
- Have a well developed administrative structure and professional staffing
- Have effective systems for identifying and disseminating good practice
- Have processes and procedures that are subject and responsive to external academic points of reference
- Have the University as its principal validating authority.

To become accredited, partner institutions are required to submit an analytical account outlining the institution's case based on the above criteria. If successful the institution will undergo an audit conducted by the University to establish that the functions for which the institution is seeking accredited status are being discharged effectively. If successful at the end of this stage a visit to the institution will be undertaken by an accreditation panel comprising internal and external members. Once all stages have been completed and accredited status conferred, an agreement is entered into which sets out a number of obligations that the partner institution must fulfil, including the provision of reports of programme approval and review events, nominations and appointments of external examiners, the provision of annual monitoring reports, and an annual statement that the obligations have been discharged properly.

Renewal of accredited status will be at intervals no greater than five years and will comprise a self-evaluation report submitted by the partner institution followed by an accreditation panel visit.

1.2.2 Approval of Institutions, Degree-Types, Programmes

The institutional 'right to exist within the system' has two elements in the UK context. The first is the right to a university (or university college) title. The second is the right to award degrees. The latter can be separated into the right to award degrees for taught courses and the right to award research degrees. The important point to note is that both rights, once awarded, cannot be removed without a special Act of Parliament. (This is the case in England. There are no such powers referred to in the case of Scotland.) It follows therefore that many universities received these rights quite long ago and according to the procedures in place at the time. Thus, the old universities (i.e. pre-1992) operate under a Royal Charter while the new universities (i.e. post-1992) and certain other higher education institutions operate under an Instrument of Government and Articles of Government. The authority for the award of and amendment to royal charters, instruments and articles resides with the Privy Council – one of the oldest parts of Government. It is also responsible for approving the use of the title 'university' and the granting of degree awarding powers. (The powers of certain professional bodies also derive from the Privy Council. See above.) Currently, such advice regarding the award of university titles or degree awarding powers would be made on the basis of very

thorough evaluation and review procedures by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and, in the case of university titles, an evaluation of the financial stability of the institution by the relevant higher education funding council. (Separate councils exist for England, Scotland and Wales, but not for Northern Ireland where funding matters reside with the Department for Education Northern Ireland.)

Applications are considered against criteria agreed between the QAA and government, and are applicable throughout the UK. The criteria cover such issues as governance and management, quality assurance, administrative systems, and other specific criteria relating to the type of application (i.e., taught or research degree awarding powers or university title).

Applications for degree awarding powers or a university title can only be made if an institution is able to demonstrate that its provision or institutional audit has not been subject to an unsatisfactory outcome as a result of a review by the quality assurance body in the last five years (see below for details of these processes). The 2003 Government 'White Paper' on *The future of higher education* has indicated that the criteria for degree awarding powers will be examined and modernised to reflect the increasing diversity of higher education, although 'there will be no relaxation of the high standards that have to be reached before taught degree awarding powers are granted'.

It should be noted that recent applications for the award of a university title have mostly ended in failure. For example, the Bolton Institute, a large well-established institution in the north-west of the country already possessing degree-awarding powers, had its application for a university title turned down in 2001 following a special institutional audit by the QAA. The conclusions of the report, and therefore the reasons why the Institute was turned down, are not public. The most recent successful application for the award of a university title was the University of Gloucestershire in 2001. Again, the report is not a public document.

At the level of degrees and programmes, approval is the responsibility of the individual university. Procedures vary but are subject to periodic audit by the QAA. Procedures include arrangements for regular monitoring and periodic review, often involve external inputs. But they are formally a matter for the individual university.

1.2.3 *Approval Outside the Accreditation Scheme*

There are hardly any examples of this in the UK case. The Archbishop of Canterbury is one of a small number of bodies and individuals who have a traditional authority to award certain specific degrees. Concerns about 'bogus degrees' surfaced at the end of the 1980s and the government department (DfES) issued 'recognised and listed body orders' to attempt to regulate new providers. A specific case was the creation of an American institution—now Richmond College—which attempted to establish itself as Richmond University. This was prevented—it would have been acceptable if there had been a parent Richmond University in the USA. The solution was for the institution to be renamed Richmond College and to seek accreditation from the UK Open University, whose degree awarding powers were used for Richmond students. This example illustrates the UK arrangement well. Anyone can establish a college or institute. But the title of university is protected as is the authority to award degrees.

1.2.4 *Evaluation schemes: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*

Evaluation of universities and other institutions with degree awarding powers in the UK is the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). It was created in 1997. The QAA's mission is 'to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education' (Strategic Plan 2003-05, March 2003).

Consistent with the UK emphasis upon institutional autonomy, the focus of QAA evaluation is the way in which an institution safeguards and ensures quality and standards. It is not

attempting to make a direct judgement about quality or standards. The Agency will express varying degrees of ‘confidence’ in the institution and although such judgements have no formal status for the recognition of the institution or its programmes, they may affect the institution’s reputation and the funding decisions of the relevant higher education funding councils.

The QAA is a UK-wide organisation, but operates in a devolved context. The Agency has devolved responsibilities in Scotland and Wales, operating through QAA Scotland and the Advisory Committee for Wales, respectively. The QAA works on behalf of the different national higher education funding councils and has contractual agreements with each – the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department of Education Northern Ireland.

The QAA is formally ‘owned’ by all UK higher education institutions, who pay a subscription and the heads of the institutions are the company’s shareholders. However, much of its funding and ‘powers’ are effectively delegated to it by the higher education funding councils. The Governing Body of the QAA has a ‘controlling’ external (non HE) membership in the majority. Thus, the QAA is intended to be independent although its owners could theoretically decide to close it down. The QAA has around 50 staff. Its reviewers (‘auditors’) are drawn from higher education institutions and receive training from the Agency. QAA reports are published and therefore have potential to influence all ‘customers’ and stakeholders. However, generally they have received little attention outside the higher education institution concerned, except for a few celebrated critical cases. New arrangements being introduced in England and Northern Ireland in 2003 place greater emphasis on the publication of information on quality and standards. Although this will be the responsibility of individual higher education institutions, the QAA will have a role in ‘auditing’ the information provided. (The following sections refer to the arrangements in England and Northern Ireland. New developments in arrangements in Scotland and Wales are different and are described at the end of this section.)

The main procedures operated by the QAA are institutional audit, qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and codes of practice.

1.2.5 Institutional Audit

The new approach, introduced in 2003, focuses on institutional audit—a review of the way in which an institution safeguards and ensures quality and standards. Where areas of concern are identified, the audit will be followed up by reviews at subject level.

In addition, institutions are now expected to collect and make publicly available information about the quality and standards of their programmes. This includes summaries of external examiners’ reports, results of student feedback surveys, internal programme reviews and so on.

Audit aims to examine three areas:

- The effectiveness of institutions’ internal quality assurance processes and with reference to the QAA’s *Code of Practice* (see below)
- The accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information published about the quality and standards of its programmes, and with reference to *programme specifications* (see below)
- Examples of the institutions’ internal quality assurance processes in operation at programme level or across the institution as a whole (covering some 10% of the institution’s provision), and with reference to the *qualifications frameworks*, the *Code of Practice* and *subject benchmark statements* (see below).

The audit visit normally lasts about five working days and covers the overall management of an institution's quality and standards and more specific areas of enquiry. In particular, the audit will focus on the following aspects relating to quality and standards:

- Publicly available information
- Internal systems for the management of information
- Internal reviews and their outcomes
- Students' experiences as learners
- The academic standards expected and achieved by students
- The use made of the qualifications framework, the Codes of Practice, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications (see below)
- The quality assurance of teaching staff

Judgements will be made by audit teams on the confidence in the 'soundness of the institutions management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards' and the reliance placed on the 'accuracy, integrity completeness and frankness of the information that an institution publishes' about its programmes and awards. Auditors will be required to report any areas of concern, make recommendations for further consideration by the institution, and identify areas where a full subject review is necessary or where an action plan needs to be implemented by the institution.

After completion of the audit and the publication of the report, the Agency will follow-up areas of weakness through institutional progress reports. As with previous approaches to reviewing quality and standards at subject level, in extreme unsatisfactory cases, the Agency will revisit an institution; if again the outcome is unsatisfactory the Higher Education Funding Council for England would withdraw its funding (although there has yet to be a case where this has occurred).

In helping to define clear and specific standards for higher education institutions, the QAA has established a number of points of reference for reviews and public information. These are the qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the Code of Practice.

1.2.6 Qualifications Frameworks

The frameworks - for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a parallel one for Scotland— have been designed to provide an easier understanding of higher education qualifications by ensuring a consistent use of qualification titles. The frameworks include qualifications such as Bachelors degree with Honours, Masters and Doctorate degrees and describe the achievements and attributes represented by these main titles. The frameworks are intended to help students and employers understand the meaning and level of qualifications. They also aim to provide public assurance that qualifications bearing similar titles represent similar levels of achievement.

1.2.7 Subject Benchmark Statements

Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of Bachelors degrees with honours in broad subject areas. They are intended to be an explicit statement of the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity. They define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the knowledge, skills and other attributes needed to develop understanding in the subject. They are benchmarks of the level of intellectual demand and challenge represented by an honours degree in the subject area concerned. Benchmark statements are intended to help higher education institutions when they design and approve programmes and to help external examiners and academic reviewers to verify and compare standards. They also provide information for students and employers. However, benchmarks

are not intended to be prescriptive. Institutions are merely required to take them into account in designing their programmes.

1.2.8 Programme Specifications

Programme specifications are standard sets of information that each institution provides about its programmes. Each specification describes what knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes a student will have developed on successfully completing a specific programme. It provides information about teaching and learning methods, assessment, and career opportunities on completion. Specifications will also explain how a particular programme relates to the qualifications framework. In providing this information, it is intended that prospective students should be able to make comparisons and informed choices about the programmes they wish to study. Programme specifications also provide useful information for recruiters of graduates.

Code of Practice

The *Code of Practice* sets out good practice relating to the management of academic quality and standards. The *Code of Practice* comprises ‘precepts or principles’ that institutions should demonstrate, together with guidance on how they might meet these precepts. The Code to date covers:

- postgraduate research programmes
- collaborative provision
- students with disabilities
- external examining
- academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters
- assessment of students
- programme approval, monitoring and review
- career education, information and guidance
- placement learning
- recruitment and admissions.

Developments in Scotland and Wales (this should be numbered?)

In Scotland, a new process of enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) is in development to start from 2003-04. ELIR is a new national strategy focussing explicitly on the enhancement of the learning experience of students. It comprises five inter-related elements:

- i) a framework for internal review at subject level
- ii) a set of public information provided by institutions
- iii) involvement of students in quality management (as members in review teams for the ELIR process, as representatives in institutions and through national surveys of the student experience)
- iv) quality enhancement engagements involving a structured programme of developmental activities with the sector
- v) the institutional review process – an enhancement-led process through peer review.

A number of reference points will be used during the ELIR process, which include the qualifications framework for Scotland, the code of practice and subject benchmarks (see above). The ELIR process itself comprises four stages: i) an annual meetings between the Agency and the institution, ii) production of a *reflective analysis* by the institution, iii) the ELIR visit and a public report (which will express a level of confidence) and iv) sector-wide feedback and workshops held annually on themes emerging from ELIR.

In Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has adopted a new quality assurance and standards framework to come into operation from 2003-04. The focus of the approach is on institutional audit and the removal of subject-level reviews. In addition, HEFCW has emphasised the need for comparability of judgments with England. The approach is similar to the one adopted for England and Northern Ireland, but with some differences (e.g. institutions will not be required to publish summaries of external examiner reports and internal programme reviews).

1.2.9 Other Evaluation Schemes

Internal review. Most evaluation is actually done within institutions on the authority of the institutions. Most have arrangements for the regular review of departments or programmes, usually involving inputs from external peers. These reviews are generally seen as part of quality enhancement activities although if major concerns arise out of a particular review, actions would probably be taken by the institution and these could include the closure of a department or programme. Until 2001, reviews at subject level were carried out by the QAA. These led to published gradings with reputational implications for the institutions and, in extremis, could lead to the withdrawal of funding by the funding council. This external review process has now been replaced by reliance on institutional review procedures and the publication of information based on them. From time to time, most institutions also review central services such as library and student support services.

External examining. Part of internal review procedures, external examining constitutes the most traditional aspect of quality assurance in UK higher education. Institutions appoint examiners from other higher education institutions to oversee the examining and the award of degrees on specific programmes. External examiners typically read a sample of the students' assessed work and provide written comments on the standards of achievement and the consistency of internal marking. They will normally attend the examination board within the awarding institution that determines the award of degrees on the particular programme. As part of the new quality assurance arrangements, external examiner reports (or extracts/summaries of them) will be published by the higher education institution.

Access to Higher Education courses are provided by further education colleges and other providers, including some universities. These courses are aimed at mature students, normally lacking formal entry qualifications, from under-represented groups to help them progress to higher education. The QAA manages the scheme that recognises these courses. Consortia are established who are responsible for developing, validating and reviewing Access to Higher Education courses. These are called Authorised Validating Agencies (AVAs). The QAA 'licenses' the AVAs to recognise courses and to issue awards to successful students.

Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) Public funding for research in higher education institutions is provided through the 'dual support' system that comprises two streams of funding:

- Funding for the research infrastructure (e.g., staff salaries, premises, computing and library costs) from the UK funding bodies
- Funding for the costs of individual research projects from the research councils.

The RAE is a means of rating the quality of research in higher education institutions and distributing the funding for the research infrastructure selectively across higher education institutions. The RAE, as well as being a tool for selectively distributing research funds, is used to promote high quality—the research submitted by higher education institutions is assessed against a benchmark of international excellence for each subject concerned. Since 1986 the process has been developed and refined. The process itself operates through peer review and subject 'experts' make up the panels for each of the 69 'units of assessment'

(subject disciplines). Experts are nominated by research associations, learned societies, PSBs and other organisations, and selected by the funding councils.

Higher education institutions are able to make submissions in as many subjects as they choose. The submissions comprise information about research active staff and details of research output for these staff (up to four items—books, papers, journals - can be submitted for each researcher). Each panel defines its own criteria for assessing submissions and these are published in advance. Panels do not visit institutions. Each submission is assessed and awarded a quality rating on a seven point scale ranging from 5* (quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted and attainable levels of national excellence in the remainder) to 1 (quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in none, or virtually none, of the research activity submitted). Upon completion of the panels' work, the outcomes are published to provide public information on the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.

Financial audit Institutions also undergo systems of financial audit by the higher education funding councils. Although no approval decisions hang on the results, the continued flow of government money ultimately does.

1.3 Analysis

1.3.1 Overview

Until a Government Act in 1988, reference was often made to the 'public sector' of higher education in the UK. This referred to local authority run colleges and polytechnics and contrasted with the 'private sector' of the universities. Today it is formally possible to see virtually all UK higher education institutions as private, albeit substantially dependent on 'public' funding. (The OECD refers to UK universities as 'state funded private institutions'.) The UK tradition has been to preserve an arms-length relationship between higher education and government in the interests of university autonomy and academic freedom. (And the separation of government from state—in the form of the Sovereign—is a further mechanism of protection of universities from political interference.) While this formal autonomy may perhaps account for the sometimes high levels of belligerence from individual vice chancellors, it might be argued that the autonomy is more apparent than real. Overall, higher education institutions are dependent on various government monies for about 80% of their funding. Only a few receive more than 50% of their funding from other sources. In many ways, it has been through its various funding mechanisms and incentives that UK government has attempted to steer and control higher education.

But it is also the case that there is probably consensus that central control should be limited. Much is made of control and steerage through the market. With well over 100 separate institutions and a tradition of students leaving home to study, institutional competition exists at quite high levels. Thus, evaluation judgements that impact upon the reputation of the institutions can have great effect on the institution's competitive position.

In summary, emphasis in the UK is placed upon the maintenance of sound, competent, well-managed institutions. The strength of university managements and administrations should be noted in the UK case with a growing emphasis upon responsiveness to markets and the role of public information to inform these markets. Evaluation is seen by Government as having an increasingly important role to play in providing information for higher education's markets.

1.3.2 Recent History

Quality assurance arrangements for higher education have been extremely unstable since the early 1990s. They have been criticised by higher education leaders, been under pressure from politicians and been generally unpopular with most academics. They have changed several times over this period. The main phases are described briefly below.

1.3.2.1 The 'ancien regime'.

At the start of the 1990s, the only external system of quality assurance in place in the universities was that of external examining. This was a voluntary self-regulatory arrangement to be found across the whole of higher education with the one exception of the University of Oxford. External examiners were responsible to the higher education institution whose courses they were examining. Politicians had been making it clear that they did not regard this system as sufficiently rigorous, especially as far more extensive national systems existed for the other sector of higher education, by now the larger, i.e. the polytechnics and colleges. The general perception was that this was all a part of the general Thatcherite attack on the public sector in general and on the professions in particular. Thus, it was regarded as a very specific problem to Britain.

The polytechnics and colleges, as well as having external examiners, were subject to the validation and accreditation requirements of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), a chartered body set up in 1964 to ensure the standards of academic awards in higher education outside the universities. The CNAA, with its degree-awarding powers, had considerable authority over the polytechnics and colleges which it exercised through linked peer review processes of institutional and programme review. This was becoming increasingly unpopular with the large and mature institutions that now comprised the 'public sector' of higher education. On the other hand, the Thatcher Government did not regard this essentially academic body as sufficiently tough on the institutions for which it was responsible. A celebrated charge of 'Marxist bias' in the teaching of sociology in one of the polytechnics saw the Government turn to its preferred instrument of quality scrutiny—Her Majesty's Inspectors. The Inspectorate operated in all public sector educational institutions, from schools to polytechnics. But at the end of the 1980s, the Government transformed their predominantly advisory role into a genuinely inspectorial one, involving the observation of teaching and with potential consequences for institutional funding.

Recognising their exposed position in comparison to the surfeit of regulation in the polytechnics and colleges, the universities' representative body, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), set up its own quality assurance system administered by a new body, the Academic Audit Unit. This was a voluntary system under which universities 'invited' the AAU to audit their internal arrangements for ensuring quality and standards. This it did through a peer review process of visits to universities. The autonomy of each individual university was to be jealously safeguarded. There was to be no question of the AAU making judgements of what the quality and standards of universities actually were. If the aim of the CVCP was to prevent the Government introducing its own evaluation system for universities, it must be judged a failure. It did however introduce the concept of academic audit into higher education with long-term consequences for the approach to evaluation in the UK.

1.3.2.2 Dual evaluations in a unitary higher education system

In 1992, the Government abolished the old higher education 'binary line', awarding university titles to all of the polytechnics, some of the larger higher education colleges and the so-called 'central institutions' in Scotland. However, in setting up a unitary system of higher education, the government established a dual system of evaluation. The AAU was transformed into the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), a body owned by the institutions through the CVCP and the equivalent body for the higher education colleges—the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP). It continued the process of audit (now called 'quality audit') and took on some of the quality enhancement functions of the CNAA. The latter was closed down although some functions for research and development and an accreditation service for non-university institutions were transferred to the Open University. In parallel to the institutionally owned HEQC, the Government established quality assessment committees in each of the national higher education funding councils. These took over the methods and many of the

staff of the Inspectorate to introduce a system of teaching quality assessment at subject level across all higher education institutions. The funding councils had, and still have, a statutory responsibility for the assessment of higher education quality.

Thus, for the rest of the decade, higher education institutions were subject to the external audit of their quality assurance procedures by the HEQC—with visits approximately every five years—and the assessment of their teaching on a subject-by-subject basis by the funding council assessors. The latter process continued to be largely based on the observation of teaching practice and resulted in public gradings of the quality of teaching in each institution. Both audit and assessment made use of peer review, auditors/assessors being drawn from higher education institutions and trained in the appropriate methods by the respective agencies. The external examining system continued as did professional accreditation and research assessment. The much-vaunted autonomy of UK universities was looking a bit thin!

1.3.2.3 A new agency.

The dual arrangements for audit and assessment were extremely unpopular in higher education. They took up a lot of time and resource during a period when higher education was expanding fast and the unit of resource was plunging. Assessment in particular, with its observation of teaching and its numerical gradings, was the cause of considerable tensions within institutions even though high grades were celebrated and used extensively in institutional publicity materials.

A joint review of the arrangements was made by the funding councils and the CVCP and this led to the creation in 1997 of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Initially, the new agency continued to operate the dual procedures of institutional-level audit and subject-level assessment (now called subject review and with much less emphasis on the observation of teaching). It was claimed that their operation by a single body would be more efficient and would make fewer demands on the institutions. Despite several tinkering with the assessment methodologies, the arrangements remained unpopular. Moreover, public and political attention was shifting away from process to outcome and calls were made for evaluation processes that would be more effective in the enhancement of quality. The fact that subject review had uncovered hardly any cases of really poor quality was also used by its opponents to argue that it was an onerous and unnecessary burden.

In a wider context, the Labour Government was continuing its Conservative predecessor's policies of introducing greater competition and consumer choice into the public sector. Consequently, it was not keen to see the removal of subject review with its gradings and consequent league tables of institutions, essential in the view of New Labour enthusiasts to inform markets, ensure competition and hence efficiency and quality improvement. If then evaluation had to produce information to inform the public, it was clear that subject review would need to be replaced by something that would also deliver consumer information. A number of influential vice-chancellors argued that institutions could do this for themselves by publishing selective extracts from the information that they held about themselves. A committee was established to consider this proposition and to make recommendations for the kinds of information to be published. The Committee's report was accepted by the funding councils and the Government and its recommendations are in the process of implementation. Subject review is being run down, replaced for an interim period by review-style 'disciplinary engagements' but lacking the controversial gradings aspect. However, institutions are expected to operate their own internal systems of review and these should include some external peer input. Information from these reviews, from external examiners and from student feedback questionnaires are among the sources of institutional data that higher education institutions are expected to publish on the web-sites.

1.3.3 Whose victory?

This brief history is necessary to record in order to understand why evaluation has been subject to so much controversy in UK higher education in recent years. To a considerable extent it can be seen as a long running battle between several governments and university leaderships. The generals have been the higher education funding councils on the one hand and the universities' representative bodies (the CVCP rebranded itself as Universities UK a few years ago) and the front-line troops have been the thousands of academic staff who have spent much time evaluating each other. In what sense then is it possible to talk about victory or defeat in this battle? On the one hand the hated teaching quality assessments have gone. On the other, external evaluation is still present and a new system, as yet untried, will expose possibly even more of the inner workings of higher education institutions to public scrutiny. If a victory is to be claimed, it probably has to go to the government side. Given the starting point of the vice chancellors of opposition to almost any form of external evaluation, the present arrangements represent a pretty comprehensive system of external scrutiny. The fact that much of the evaluative work will be done by the institutions themselves should not disguise the reality that it is being externally driven, and to an agenda dictated by government. Moreover, the notion that there should be some form of externally monitored quality assurance is now almost universally accepted by academics.

This agenda has been one of exerting control over a fast-growing and expensive area of the public sector. The traditions of relative (and symbolic) autonomy of universities in the UK go a long way to explaining why governments wanted to exert control and why universities wanted to resist it. Control mechanisms common elsewhere in Europe—e.g. over university curricula, over staffing—were entirely absent in the UK. Evaluation (or quality assurance as the more generally used term in the UK) became a principal tool for the state to acquire more control and it was seen as such by the universities.

Evaluation—especially by state controlled bodies—was objected to in principle, because it resulted in gradings and rankings, and because it was seen as consuming vast amounts of time and resource. Those operating the various evaluation procedures would stress the quality improvement potential of evaluation and while much was undoubtedly changed for the better within institutions as a result of evaluation, it was largely out of sight from the generals fighting the battle. Insofar as a quality improvement function was acknowledged, it was felt to be something which institutions could achieve for themselves much more effectively than through the efforts of an external body.

1.3.4 Consequences

Away from the noise of battle, the twin procedures of institutional audit and subject assessment have produced many changes in higher education institutions. Especially for the older pre-1992 universities, they were responsible for the establishment of internal quality assurance procedures which formalised and standardised practices which, where they had existed at all, had been informal and local rather than systematic and institution-wide. These practices would include the better documentation of courses and the requirements made of students, new monitoring and review arrangements, more systematic data collection and analysis (including student performance and feedback data), action plans to chart the effectiveness of changes made. New 'quality' committees were established as were specialist administrative units to support their work. Managers at all levels across the institutions found themselves with new responsibilities for quality and evaluation.

At the level of individual teachers, some counter pressure to the dictates of research assessment has been achieved. External evaluation has pushed teaching up the agenda of academic departments. Teaching and learning have been discussed by staff where previously they had been the private business of individuals. Staff appraisal and development systems have looked at teaching in a more systematic way. Related national developments such as the

creation of an Institute for Learning and Teaching and the subject-focused Learning and Teaching Support Networks have given further impetus to looking at the teaching function in higher education.

How far all of this has really improved the learning experiences of students is less clear. There is probably rather less really poor teaching than had existed previously. Student views are probably taken more into account although a lack of action on student feedback is a common complaint. Courses are better documented and objectives and expectations more clear. Whether these improvements compensate for the decline in resources for teaching is another matter, but given that the latter would have happened anyway these changes were probably even more necessary.

Looking outside the institutions towards other stakeholders and society in general, the effects of the evaluation systems have probably been to reinforce the already strong sense of stratification of higher education institutions in the UK. The gradings of subject assessment and research assessment have been used to create league tables of institutions. While these have mainly reinforced existing reputational hierarchies, they have given added credence to them. In a sense the post-1992 'unitary' system has become more stratified than the old 'binary' system (of universities and polytechnics). It remains to be seen whether plans to publish even more comparative data on institutions will further reinforce these hierarchies or challenge them, or at least give recognition to diversity of type and function.

An important claim for external evaluation systems was that they were essential for continued government support for higher education and that funding settlements would be in part dependent on the higher education sector having effective mechanisms of accountability for the vast sums of public money it consumed. It is difficult to really test this claim although it may be noted that the recent Government strategy announcement on higher education was financially quite generous.

It should be noted that in the context of the larger comparative project, activities that can properly be called accreditation have been left largely untouched by the controversies and changes to national evaluation arrangements. Professional bodies have continued to accredit programmes using mechanisms broadly recognisable to those which have existed for decades. Various attempts to better integrate their procedures with those of the QAA and its predecessors do not appear to have achieved a lot. (Professional bodies constitute another largely independent actor in the evaluation scene and have had no overwhelming interest in seeing their autonomy and authority diminished by closer collaboration with other actors.) University accreditation of other institutions and programmes has been affected by QAA guidelines and its reviews of 'collaborative provision'. These have not been particularly controversial although in the case of international partnerships they may have limited the entrepreneurial zeal of certain universities.

However, in the UK, the QAA can be seen as the body, and institutional audit (or its equivalent in the different countries) as the process, that brings together the different accreditation and evaluation schemes. Institutional audit focuses on the ways in which an institution safeguards and ensures the quality and standards of its awards. For example and as described above, audit does this through examining institutional procedures for internal review, how institutions act upon the reports of professional and statutory bodies, what action they take in the light of external examiners comments, and how well an institution manages its partnership arrangements within the UK and abroad.

1.4 International

There has been little apparent influence of European or wider international developments on accreditation and evaluation procedures in the UK. Rather, the influence has been seen in the other direction with UK models exported to other countries (largely to former colonies).

Insofar as key actors have looked outside the UK for inspiration, it has been towards the US or Australia rather than across the English Channel to the rest of Europe. The recent Government strategy paper makes virtually no reference to Bologna and European issues although references abound to notions of ‘world class’ and ‘international excellence’. That said, individuals from UK quality agencies are active in the various international forums to do with accreditation and evaluation. But while there may be an awareness of the international issues and contexts, it is rarely visible in domestic debates. The one area where there has been international activity has been with regards to the overseas collaborations of UK higher education institutions. These come within the remit of the QAA and are audited in quite rigorous ways. The basic principle has been that quality and standards should be equal to the institution’s UK provision. This is an issue of ongoing concern and debate, especially with regard to the extent to which UK institutions have the mechanisms to discharge their responsibilities when working with other institutions in other jurisdictions. As more and more countries establish their own accreditation or evaluation systems, the potential for a clash of regulatory procedures becomes more likely. It may be that this will make the British more interested in a possible harmonisation of evaluation practices but there are few signs of this to date.

International issues are also of interest to professional bodies and there are signs of international accreditation/evaluation developments in several fields. A European system for the review of business and management programmes has been in existence for some time (EQUIS—European Quality Improvement System). As at November 2002, 12 UK business schools have been awarded the European Quality label.

1.5 Other Quality Assessment Activities

Staff appraisal systems have been in existence in UK universities for some years now. They differ to some extent between institutions but tend to emphasise a staff development function. They do however also contribute to promotion decisions. (They generally take the form of an annual interview with a senior colleague which reviews the achievements and difficulties of the last year and sets objectives and targets for the next.)

They do not relate directly to other evaluation or quality assessment activities other than in the sense that any recent evaluation experiences would probably be discussed during the annual interview. The introduction of systematic staff appraisal arrangements was at the prompting of Government in return for a more favourable funding settlement.