QUALITY ASSURANCE AND LABOUR MARKET RESPONSIVENESS IN HE

Final English National Report

Labour Market Involvement in Quality Assurance in Vocationally/Professionally Oriented Higher Education in Europe

Final Report, England

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Preface

The internationalisation and integration of the European labour market and the increasing mobility of, especially higher educated, graduates is demanding the attention of politicians involved in education in many countries. Transparency of the different higher education systems and diplomas in Europe is a first requirement to facilitate this mobility.

In response to this, the Bologna declaration (1999) agreed that higher education courses in 29 European countries should be composed of two cycles. First-degree cycles in higher education should not be shorter than three years of study, and should be relevant to the labour market.

Another important objective in the Bologna declaration is the introduction of a European-wide quality assurance dimension.

Given the openness and diversity of the European higher education area, an important question arises which has relevance for the transparency of education and training: from a quality assurance perspective, what is required to ensure that a first degree of three years is of relevance to the labour market?

Quality assurance can be examined from different angles. This includes the quality of the management and organisation of a higher education institution, the didactical approaches used, the perspectives of the students, and the perspectives of work organisations where graduates will be employed in the future.

Until recently, assessments of the quality of higher education have underutilised the perspectives and involvement of the business community (defined to include not only employers themselves, but employers' federations, chambers of commerce, social partners *etc.*), probably for historical and cultural reasons: 'le champ d'evaluation de la relation Formation-Emploi demeure peu réglementé et peu institutionalisé' (from Dubois P *et al.*, Evaluation and auto-evaluation des universités en Europe, Paris, 1998).

Tertiary higher education has traditionally been, and continues to be, in a much more autonomous position than secondary education. The educationalists define the content of their courses (mainly) themselves, and the influence of the surrounding working world was absent or limited, often to individual

initiatives. Strong professional interests groups (such as physicians and dentists) in some cases (try to) exert influence on the quantitative and qualitative nature of education in their sector. External parties, from the state to the social partners, seem to play a very modest role when changes in the content of higher professional education and training are at stake. The relationship between higher professional education and training and the working world, or the lack of such a relationship, is strongly embedded in the educational history and culture of a country.

In comparative European research, little attention has been paid to this issue. The importance of professionally-oriented higher education is clearly growing in many countries, with increasing numbers of students and new study programmes being offered. As a consequence, there is a growing need for more transparency over the content and delivery of higher vocational degree programmes in university as well as non-university environments. This comparative study, which takes place in a number of countries with distinctly different systems of higher education, therefore addresses the following question:

What is the role and the development of the labour market (stakeholders) in quality assurance (systems and follow-up) of professionally-oriented first degree programmes in higher education in Europe?

Quality assurance is of growing, but nevertheless not equal, importance in all higher education systems. This study aims to add to our understanding, by comparing the situation in five countries: two with a unitary system of higher education (the United Kingdom and Spain), two with a binary divide (the Netherlands and Germany), and one country with a 'mixed' system of professionally oriented higher education provided in or by separate institutions within universities (France).

This study gives an insight into the relationship between higher professional education and the labour market, from the quality assurance perspective. The international approach aims to widen the horizon of everybody involved in taking steps on the road towards the European area of higher education.

The reasons for setting up a quality assurance system for professionally-oriented higher education in the countries selected for the study, vary. Furthermore, the forms these systems take also vary, with different emphasis placed on the labour market in the quality assurance mechanisms and procedures. From a first perusal of the quality assurance structures in the five participating countries, it becomes apparent that the quality and transparency of higher vocational degree programmes and the transferability of diplomas still needs much attention.

In addition to concerns about transparency across different European countries, our research indicates that within a country,

quality assurance regulations can be implemented differently between higher education institutions and programmes. To get a good view on the functioning and the effects of quality assurance in practice, especially as regards the involvement of labour market (f)actors quality assurance practice, in every country has been examined in four education programmes (within two education institutions).

National reports for the five participating countries have been written on the quality assurance structures of professionally-oriented higher education. These reports also examine the actual functioning of quality assurance mechanisms, with an emphasis on the extent to which they address labour market factors. This report analyses and describes the situation in England up to June 2003.

On the basis of these country reports, a comparative study of the situation in the five countries has been produced.

The project is co-ordinated by Toos Feijen and Theo Reubsaet of REVICE – Center for Work, Training and Social Policy in Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

The researchers in the four other countries are:

- Pierre Dubois, Victor Lepaux and Ronan Vourc'h of OFIPE (Observatoire des Formations et des Insertions professionnelles), Université Marne-la Vallée in France
- David Lain and Andrew Maginn of the Institute for Employment Studies in Brighton, England
- Birgit Muetherich of the Sozial Forschungsstelle in Dortmund Germany
- Josip Maria Rotger and Emma Estany of CIREM in Barcelona, Spain.

We sincerely thank the researchers for their considerable efforts in uncovering and describing the situation in their respective countries, for their contributions to the international debate and comparative analysis, and for the organisation of the dissemination workshop that has been organised in every country.

Other partners in the project are organisations that have an interest in the theme of the project. These are:

- the Quality Assurance Department of the Association of Universities of Professional Education (HBO Council) in the Netherlands (Mark Frederiks)
- the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK (Peter Wright)
- the Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari a Catalunya (AQU) in Spain (Josep Grifoll Sauri)

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1. Introduction

This report brings together the main research components of the English contribution to the LABMAQUAL research project, funded through the EU's Leonardo Programme. The research examines how (if at all) vocational higher education is responsive to the needs of the labour market, and how this is related to quality assurance policies, procedures and structures. The research has been conducted in five countries with a diversity of experiences in this area: Holland, Germany, Spain, France and England. Reports similar to this one have been produced by our research partners in each of these countries. In addition, our Dutch lead partner, REVICE, has produced a synthesis report, which summarises and draws conclusions from the project as a whole.

It is important to be clear on a couple of matters before reading this report. First, this report relates to England, not the UK. This is because there are differences in the way higher education is structured, delivered, and held accountable across the countries of the United Kingdom. These differences are particularly apparent when comparing Scotland and England in this regard. Second, it looks at honours Bachelor degree level provision, and not at so-called 'other undergraduate' levels of higher vocational education, *ie* non-honours Bachelor degrees, Foundation degrees, Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas. These are referred to in the report, but they are not the main subject of study.

The main research components mentioned above attempt to address the issues involved from three angles. These are described below.

Part 1: The History and Structure of English Higher Vocational Education

Chapters 2 to 6

Part 1 examines the historical development of higher vocational education in England; the scale of vocational HE and the labour market prospects for graduates; and, very broadly, quality assurance processes and the means by which courses remain responsive the labour market. Part 1 gives a lot of the detailed information upon which subsequent chapters build on and investigate further.

Part 2: English case studies

Chapters 7 to 14

The second component of the research is case studies, the subjects for which are four higher vocational degree programmes across two universities. The report addresses how these degree programmes felt they remained responsive to the needs of the labour market, with particular focus on the old subject-review system operated by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency. The intention of these case studies was to examine how one formerly important aspect of the quality assurance system — subject reviews — operated in practise, rather than in theory. The case studies of four subject programmes were across two higher education institutions (HEIs).

The case studies were, at the first institution:

- electrical engineering
- information and library studies.

At the second institution, the subject areas were:

- hospitality and tourism
- marketing.

It must be emphasised that the case studies relate to a review system that has since been discontinued, although the findings should still be of interest to those with a concern for quality assurance and the means by which courses remain responsive to the needs of the labour market (see Chapter 7).

Part 3: Survey of employers

Chapters 15 to 17

Whilst Part 2 obtains the perspectives of those working in higher education, Part 3 extends the range of opinion to include that of employers. Employers views were sought via surveys of employers of Librarians and Engineers in the South East (including London). The types of employers, as well as the geographical area, were selected to tie in with two of the four case studies.

In particular, the survey gauged employers links with higher education institutions; the quality of graduates from these institutions; and their perspectives on employer involvement in HE programmes, as a means for ensuring labour market responsiveness.

The survey was not aimed at obtaining a representative selection of opinion from librarianship and engineering employers as a whole. Instead, the sampling method employed was designed to

elicit opinion from employers in these sectors who had a particular interest in the issues involved and, preferably, links to an HEI degree programme.

Part 4: Conclusions and considerations

Chapter 18

The final part of the report draws together conclusions from the research, and considers the implications of these conclusions.

Part 1:
History and Structure of English Higher Vocational Education

2. History of Higher Vocational Education

2.1 The origins of technical education

2.1.1 Introduction to English system

The most important element of the English system, when comparing it to that of other countries, is that higher vocational education (HVE) provision has mostly developed upwards from the tertiary level. The structures, institutions and qualification frameworks supporting and delivering HVE have, therefore, evolved upwards from that level. One result is that the quite clear distinction found in some other countries between higher and further/tertiary education (*eg* in the Netherlands) is not as clear-cut in the English system.

The legal framework is considerably less significant than in some other European countries. Indeed, very many important changes have taken place outwith formal legislation through agreements between government and sector bodies, and representatives. It would be misleading, therefore, to produce a table of legislative landmarks in the way it is possible to do for some other European countries. However, relevant legislative landmarks are marked within the text of this chapter in bold, so that they can be readily identified, and they are therefore contextualised within the wider forces and circumstances that helped to mould them.

2.1.2 Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

The origins of modern technical education in England contain the seeds for the current complexities of the system. The system developed through local initiative and *ad hoc* arrangements. The impetus behind these developments was a need to meet the needs and wishes of employed individuals, as well as those of employers. Neither individuals or employers, en masse, have ever held overall sway within the system.

Technical education in the modern sense, developed in response to the industrial revolution during the eighteenth century. The rapid spread of the factory system generated new and higher-level requirements for skills and technical expertise.

The growing demands of industry for skilled labour complemented the growing aspirations of a new, industrialised working class. The latter saw, in technical education, an opportunity for self-help and self-improvement. In the early nineteenth century libraries, book clubs and mutual improvement societies arose spontaneously to meet the needs of the skilled working classes. Although not always 'technical' or even 'vocational' in the sense we will use in this paper, such clubs and societies were the forerunners of what was to become the Mechanics Institute Movement.

The first Mechanics Institute was established in 1823 by George Birkbeck in London. Its *Rules and Orders* stated that the objective of the Institute was: 'the instruction of the members in the principles of the Arts they practise, and in the various branches of Science and useful knowledge'. By the year 1850, there were 651 similar institutes in existence, collectively known as the Mechanics Institute Movement. The original institution has now become Birkbeck College, a part of the federal London University. It is renowned for offering part-time degree courses for those in work.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 spurred technical education onwards, and in 1856 the Royal Society for Arts (RSA) started a system of exams for artisans. The Department of Science and Art was created to establish a scheme of examinations in science and industrial design. Mechanics institutes and the livery companies of the City of London went on to develop regionally- and nationally-based examination bodies. In the late nineteenth century, the City and Guilds Institute was founded with the aim of creating a national system of technical education.

The Mechanics institutes continued to develop in the late nineteenth century, and new colleges opened, including two founded by the City and Guilds of London Institute: Finsbury Technical College (1883) and the Central Institution (1884).

The divorce between higher and vocational education

Despite the achievements of the Mechanics Institute Movement, it is important not to overplay their successes, or to assume their (limited) integration into higher education is reflective of a wider trend of vocational education in HE at that time.

In fact, technical vocational education has, until relatively recently, been predominately separate from higher education. For centuries, vocational and professional education has existed outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, universities. Medicine was taught in hospital medical schools; law was learnt in the Inns of court; engineering was studied under the powerful aegis of professional bodies. Oxford and Cambridge, the only universities up to 1823, had 'turned their back on professional education, and offered a narrow curriculum based on Classics at Oxford and mathematics at Cambridge' (Anderson, 1995). The same broad

pattern of 'de-vocationalisation' of provision — offering arts and humanities degrees suitable for Civil Service entry — was apparent in the civic universities. Clearly, the relationship between vocational education and HEIs is much weaker than in other European countries — something which was carried on into the twentieth century.

2.1.3 Twentieth century

The 1902 Education Act led to the establishment of technical schools that would prepare twelve and thirteen year old boys for employment. These technical schools tended to have strong local industrial links, and sought to prepare boys for actual vacancies and needs that existed in the local labour market, including apprenticeships.

Another important element of vocational education that emerged during this time was night school, which gave workers the opportunity to train outside working hours. These schools became the main route to promotion, particularly after 1921 with the introduction of a national certificate system that meant such (night school) study could be accredited. The Ordinary and Higher National Certificates, for example, which could be studied at night school, became the principal means of progression for those being professional engineers. Until 1944, daytime colleges were very rare in England.

Vocational education was not properly integrated into HE to any great level until after this date, and quite slowly — indeed arguably not until the introduction of polytechnics in the 1960s. This is explored further in the following sections (2.2 and 2.3).

2.2 The evolution of technical colleges

The 1944 Education Act is an important moment in the history of technical and vocational education in England. As in many other areas of national life, preparations were being made for a post-second world war life in which working class people could enjoy better prospects and a better standard of living.

The Act imposed a statutory duty on Local Education Authorities (LEAs):

> *'To secure the provision for their area of adequate facilities for further education, that is to say, full-time and part-time education for persons over compulsory school age',* (Education Act, 1944).

LEAs were (and still are) an arm of local civic government, and hence some degree of local democratic accountability was introduced into the area of vocational and tertiary education. Another element was the systematic planning of provision, with LEAs beginning to consider the spread of provision across their

entire area, something that had not been done before under the old *ad hoc* arrangements.

The result was a sustained expansion in further education, which has continued throughout the second half of this century. This expansion took two main forms.

Some colleges specialised in further and tertiary education for 16-19 year olds, both full time and part time. With a strongly community-orientated role, such colleges typically provided both vocational (technical) education and also mainstream academic education. Whether called technical colleges, further education colleges, or tertiary colleges, they often provided a very broad range of teaching. Within this wide spread of provision, some retained the title of technical colleges, and specialised in serving the needs of particularly important local industries.

Another route for colleges was to specialise in longer courses of higher vocational education for older or adult students. From the mid-1940s onwards, there was a trend towards 'separate development' of the vocational system. The view was that technical education should be delivered in specialist institutions, some of whose provision could be the equal of university-level courses without actually being at degree level. Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) were created to meet such an aim. At the level of qualifications and awards, the National Council for Technological Awards (NCTA) conferred around 3,000 different Diploma of Technology (Dip Tech) awards for courses delivered in local authority technical colleges between the years 1956 and 1964.

These Diplomas were often regarded as being comparable to (bachelors) degree level, but they were not degrees. However, in 1963, CATs were bestowed with university-level status, and they all subsequently became polytechnics. The development of polytechnics in the 1960s is important for the development of higher vocational education, as is discussed in the following section (2.3).

2.3 Ideology and the development of a binary divide

Pressures and tensions within the system grew strongly during the 1950s and early 1960s, due to two main factors: supply (of potential learners) and the *de facto* establishment of a broad parity between higher-level academic and higher-level vocational education. We will briefly review both these forces.

2.3.1 Supply

Strong pressures developed to expand numbers in the system overall, driven in part by the needs of the labour market, but also by 'supply factors': a growing supply of increasingly well-

educated young people who were qualified to succeed in higher-level study. Added to this were more ambitious social aspirations amongst those from social classes who had (before the 1950s) not considered themselves eligible or entitled to seek higher-level education.

A bottleneck had developed, however, whereby these raised standards of educational attainment among school leavers were not matched by increased provision of mainstream higher education. Instead, the autonomous higher education institutions were raising their entry requirements as a way of rationing growing places, leading to large numbers of able young people being denied opportunities. By raising their entry standards, non-university higher-level education institutions were further closing the gap (actual and perceived) between university- and non-university level provision.

A conservative element within society resisted rapid expansion of higher education on what can, with retrospect, most fairly be described as elitist grounds: the slogan 'more means worse' was used by this lobby. The higher education system was immensely influential within a system that still retained within it, elements of deference. The egalitarian spirit of England from the mid-1960s (with a new Labour government, and a fashion for working class and youth culture) had yet to awaken. Indeed, compared for example with the further education system, higher education remains a sector with direct and influential links to the highest levels within government, and is one that has traditionally had its interests well represented within the House of Lords (the second, revisionary chamber of the UK parliament).

2.3.2 Policy response

Technical and vocational education, nurtured outside higher education (within local authority technical colleges), had increased in level and scale to the point at which it was on the verge of becoming a shadow or parallel system: at degree level, but not called a degree; at a higher level, but outside the university system. It was able to attract highly-qualified candidates who were excluded from the highly-selective and small academic system. This trend was one that required acknowledgement in policy, and in the early 1960s the government established a committee to investigate the entire higher education system. The Robbins Committee, as it was called, established the principle that:

> *'All young persons qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a full time course in higher education should have the opportunity to do so.'*

The government response was to approve a rapid expansion of the higher education system, to keep up with demand. However, there was also a policy to equalise the esteem and value with which

higher-level vocational and higher-level academic attainment were held. The academic and vocational were to be different but equal, and a 'binary' system would respect the two traditions. A unitary system was not favoured by government because it was believed it would result in a hierarchy of institutions, with traditional universities at the top and vocational institutions at the bottom. An essential thrust of the Robbins Report, for a unified higher education system in which universities would be dominant, was therefore shelved by government in favour of a 'separate but equal' model of development.

CATs (Colleges of Advanced Technology) were granted university status (and became Loughborough, Bath, Bradford and Brunel Universities) but otherwise, the number of universities was frozen. Growth was channelled into a network of 30 polytechnics, which were welded together from existing art, design, commerce and technology colleges.

The defining features of the polytechnics were that they would concentrate on higher-level vocational education. They catered for a wide range of students by offering part-time and sub-degree level courses such as Higher National Diplomas, as well as full-time degree level courses.

Since the 1950s, the English higher education system (unlike the Scottish one) has been a national one, with students moving away from their home region for their studies.[1] Although there was an element of this in the new polytechnic system, these new institutions were far more local in terms of their student recruitment profile. They served a distinctively local mission, which included links with local industry, commerce and other employers.

Polytechnics were not awarded the powers to confer degrees on a par with the autonomous universities. Instead, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was responsible for validating polytechnic degrees and for ensuring that degree-level awards within the polytechnics met a standard that would make such degrees comparable to those of the universities.

2.4 End of the binary divide

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the polytechnic sector was growing in size and esteem, and there was a slight, but perceptible tide towards 'convergence' between polytechnics and at least part of the university system.

[1] Prior to 1950, civic universities tended to recruit locally. National recruitment grew after around 1950 due to the introduction of maintenance grants, which enabled students to leave home to study.

In a process that some describe as 'academic drift', many polytechnics sought to broaden their curriculum to include less vocational provision. Countering this, some of the universities sharpened the vocational focus of some of their provision, for example in areas of engineering and technology. As part of this trend, universities began a to offer a wider, albeit limited, range of vocational education — for example business studies, computer science *etc.* However, it is often said that in order for such courses to be accepted by universities they adopted the traits of HE — and it is often far from clear if students will enter these professions.

Although still distinct (*ie* with more vocational and local orientation in the polytechnics than in the universities), the two sectors were gradually assuming common traits.

Polytechnics developed a more 'national' pattern of recruitment than the colleges from which they had developed, aided during the 1970s and 1980s by their absorption of teacher training colleges, which had largely national recruitment patterns. Additionally, the inclusion of teacher training required polytechnics to broaden their teaching of humanities and social sciences.

The 1988 Education Reform Act took control of polytechnics and colleges of higher education away from local authority LEAs (local education authorities). They became independent corporations that were accountable to, and funded by, national funding councils.

There were complaints by some that this was undemocratic, as elected politicians on local authority education committees no longer made decisions. The legislation may, in that sense, be seen as being motivated largely by a desire of the then government to reduce the powers of local government in general, rather than to remove a barrier to unifying the two higher education sectors. In any event, accountability of sorts was built into the system in terms of the governance of the newly-independent institutions.

Following this, provisions within the 1988 act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act were used to end the binary divide between polytechnics and universities.

Under the 1992 legislation, Higher Education Funding Councils, with responsibility for funding universities and colleges of higher education, were established in England, Scotland and Wales to replace the Universities Funding Council, and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council. As a consequence of this funding decision, all higher education institutions were redesignated as 'Higher Education Corporations'.

Following the 1988 and 1992 acts, and using provisions from the legislation, in 1992 the government decision was taken to allow all polytechnics to apply to the privy council to be granted the title and status of university. The only condition placed on polytechnics

was that that the title of the new university was not 'misleading' — *ie* it was where it said it was, and acceptable to nearby 'old' universities. Within a very short time of the government decision, weeks rather than years, every single polytechnic — 31 in total — was awarded the title of university.

This very rapid transition to university status was in sharp contrast to the experience of institutions applying for university status prior to 1992, who had to undergo the process of obtaining a Royal Charter — a long, arduous task involving assessments by expert panels, much paper work *etc.* In effect 'post-1992' universities, therefore, came into effect with no assessment being made of their suitability for university status, past performance or standards.

On the other hand, this raised the number of universities by approximately 60 per cent, and this was considered desirable by government. Indeed, the change no doubt reflected the rise in stature and progress of many polytechnics up to this point. However, it has been argued by people in higher education that the succession of quality assurance arrangements after 1992 were, in part, a response to the earlier decision to turn polytechnics into universities without assessing their suitability for the tasks involved.

Related developments in further education

It is worth noting here some important developments that took place, in parallel, with the further education system. Under the 1992 Act, all further education and tertiary colleges (as well as sixth-form colleges) were finally taken away from local authority control and placed under the auspices of the Further Education Funding Council. Each was to be an independent corporation, although to survive it needed to meet funding council standards and be recognised as part of the sector. Colleges were encouraged to compete with one another, as well as with other sectors.

With less local planning and more local competition between institutions and sectors, the intention was to improve standards, increase learner choice, and make provision more responsive to local needs (including those of the local labour market).

More importantly for this project, however, it should be noted that 'in recent years, further education colleges (FECs) have come to play an increasingly important role as providers of higher education programmes' (HEFCE 2003b). This development has been encouraged by the government, as further education colleges have traditionally been more successful at recruiting social groups who have been under-represented in higher education. Attracting socially disadvantaged groups to HE is clearly necessary if the government is to achieve its aim of having half of all 18-30 year olds experiencing higher education by 2010 (HEFCE 2003b).

However, whilst over one-tenth of students enrolling for HE courses did so in FECs in the academic year 2000/01 (HEFCE 2002b), it is fair to assume that the majority of these were below Bachelors level — the type of degree this report focuses on (see section 3.2.)

2.5 Qualifications

The British qualification system is characterised by its complexity. There are repeated reinventions that aim to rationalise the system but which, arguably, can result in further confusion. This is particularly the case in the area of vocational qualifications. To understand developments in higher vocational education, it is important to understand the development of the vocational qualification system(s) in England.

Of particular note for this report is a general trend towards a qualification system that reflects the historic structures of providers. Traditionally, higher vocational education in England has tended to focus most strongly on a level that is below that of bachelors degree, and this is acknowledged in two major qualifications: Higher National Certificates, and the more advanced Higher National Diplomas. Former polytechnics within the university system have retained these qualifications, some of which articulate to degree-level qualifications (*eg* students can transfer to second year of a degree course once they have attained an HND).

New Foundation Degrees — two year vocational degrees delivered by universities, further education colleges and employers — build on this English tradition of focusing some higher vocational education below bachelors degree level.

The QAA framework for higher education qualifications (QAA, January 2001), was presented by the agency as a means to:

- 'enable employers, schools, parents, prospective students and others to understand the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles
- maintain international comparability of standards, especially in the European context, to ensure international competitiveness, and to facilitate student and graduate mobility
- assist learners to identify potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning
- assist higher education institutions, their external examiners, and the (QAA) reviews, by providing important points of references for setting and assessing standards.'

The QAA framework describes five levels of qualification with higher education, as follows:

1.	Certificate	(**C** level)	Certificates of Higher Education
2.	Intermediate	(**I** level)	Foundation degrees, ordinary (Bachelors) degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education and other higher diplomas
3.	Honours	(**H** level)	Bachelors degrees with Honours, Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas
4.	Masters	(**M** level)	Masters degrees, Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas
5.	Doctoral	(**D** level)	Doctorates

Please note that although the QAA Code of Practice uses the above numbering system (1-5), this has nothing at all to do with the NVQ 1-5 Levels, in which a Bachelors degree is Level 4 (regardless of whether ordinary or honours) and a postgraduate qualification is Level 5.

The qualification framework contains 'qualification descriptors' which outline in broad terms, the level that typical graduates should have attained. Most of the descriptors are academic in nature, concerning the ability of a graduate to comprehend, interpret and apply information. However, there are explicit 'employability' indicators that could have significant impact on labour market responsiveness of provision. If the code starts to be applied (and currently it is not), it would require of course planners that they consciously and carefully consider the extent to which provision equips graduates with useful workplace abilities. For example, at intermediate level (I), which includes non-honours Bachelors degrees, graduates will typically possess:

> *'Qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.'*

At honours Bachelors degree level (H), graduates will typically possess:

> *'Qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:*
>
> *- the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility*
>
> *- decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts*
>
> *- the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.'*

Those graduating with Masters qualifications are expected to have broadly the same level of 'employability' except that the last criteria for honours Bachelors graduates (ability to undertake further professional training) is slightly different:

> *'The independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.'*

We wonder if such criteria may attract some criticism, implying as they do that there is some kind of relationship between level of qualification and subsequent ability to make decisions in difficult or unpredictable workplace situations. This is hierarchical, and arguably against the grain of introducing more vocationally-specific and part-time higher qualifications, such as the new Foundation degrees.

It is also important to recognise that an assessment of the success of the framework in the areas stipulated is not possible in the context of this project. Nevertheless, the qualifications framework does, for the first time, introduce a range of external measures against which educational provision can be assessed.

2.6 System requirements

The government sets the framework within which higher vocational education is planned, funded and delivered. This framework has important implications for quality assurance, in that it provides clues to the types of connections that should be put in place between HEIs (higher education institutions) and others (including employers) in planning and evaluating education. However, currently, the government's view appears to be that higher education remains separate from the rest of the vocational education and training community. For example, the government's Performance and Innovation Unit study on Workforce Development (2001) examined all developments except higher education — a curious omission that appears, at least in part, to be a consequence of organisational separation of duties within the policy departments of government.

Employers are avowedly at the heart of the system, and their needs are explicitly addressed throughout the higher vocational education system. This may sound paradoxical in a system in which student choice is the single most important determinant of provision. However, it is partly in recognition of the heavy 'supply-side' bias of the system (*ie* student choice) that the government has created a framework that redresses the balance and requires demand-side (*ie* employer) needs to be addressed.

The British system is essentially voluntary, in that employers are not required to train or develop staff, nor are they required to fund such training as part of any specific levy (with a few exceptions, *eg* in construction). Employers are, therefore, encouraged to set up Sector Skills Councils, that will communicate their needs to government, and education and training providers. These sectoral bodies are new (building on the previous National Training Organisations), but will have an important role in articulating employer needs of higher vocational education and making representations to providers, including higher education.

At a spatial level, higher education engages with skills development and regional economic development agencies in a number of ways. For example, senior staff from universities often sit on boards of Regional Development Agencies, and are often involved in steering and advisory roles for local Learning and Skills Councils (which fund vocational education below degree level). Regional Development Agencies and local Learning and Skills Councils each have a requirement for employer representation on their boards. They are increasingly important as a conduit for exchange between employers' needs and the provision that universities and other institutions offer.

3. Higher Vocational Education and the Graduate Labour Market: Facts and Figures

3.1 Introduction

In this short chapter, we provide some data on higher vocational education and the graduate labour market, in order to provide some indication of:

- the magnitude of provision
- its growth over recent years
- the labour market outcomes for graduates with bachelors degrees.

Graduates with other undergraduate-level qualifications are not included in the data (see Chapter 1).

3.2 Scale of provision

Table 3.1 shows the numbers of students graduating with first degrees *in the UK*, according to subject, between the academic years 1994/95 and 2001/02. This includes Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which are not otherwise included in this report. Nevertheless, because the bulk of higher education teaching occurs in England, we can interpret the data as being strongly indicative of the English situation.

The first thing to note is the significant rise in students graduating with a first degree over the eight year period. This number rose from 211,841 to 380,920 — an increase of almost 80 per cent.

Table 3.1 contains a mass of information which, whilst necessary for the report, is hard to analyse in terms of the proportions of students studying different subjects. This is because it is hard, without percentages, to tell if a change within a certain category follows the broad pattern of overall increase, or if certain subjects areas are rising disproportionately in terms of graduating students. Table 3.2 gives the percentage breakdown by subject area.

Table 3.1: Number of bachelors degrees obtained, UK, 1994/95 to 2001/02

Subject area	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
Medicine & Dentistry	5,539	5,591	5,780	5,870	5,805	5,920	8,135	8,350
Subjects Allied to Medicine	8,669	9,795	11,143	12,230	13,727	13,440	31,190	35,090
Biological Sciences	11,902	13,312	14,840	16,324	16,801	17,890	23,235	22,755
Veterinary Science	460	455	519	489	527	550	720	780
Agriculture & Related Subjects	1,810	2,084	2,248	2,234	2,269	2,260	4,260	4,145
Physical Sciences	12,833	13,166	13,573	12,876	12,635	12,780	17,405	16,465
Mathematical Sciences	4,033	4,027	3,664	3,904	4,214	4,060	5,320	5,355
Computer Science	7,789	8,682	8,616	9,334	9,654	10,280	19,885	22,630
Engineering & Technology	20,511	21,689	21,501	21,010	20,360	18,810	27,755	27,415
Architecture, Building & Planning	6,717	7,116	6,421	6,008	5,935	5,280	8,325	7,995
Social, Economic & Political Studies	19,025	20,252	20,475	19,846	20,516	21,640	31,810	32,020
Law	8,537	9,004	8,984	8,875	9,018	9,380	16,320	17,690
Business & Administrative Studies	24,207	26,187	26,839	26,963	28,154	29,040	47,550	48,900
Librarianship & Information Science	2,415	2,695	3,204	3,357	3,661	4,450	6,815	8,100
Languages	15,351	15,928	16,134	16001	15,528	16,220	20,035	19,325
Humanities	9,773	10,072	10,000	10,001	9,996	9,970	12,305	12,620
Creative Arts & Design	14,337	16,446	17,789	18,987	19,892	20,860	27,930	29,555
Education	12,866	13,829	12,894	13,046	12,879	11,170	32,495	34,770
Combined	25,067	26,296	25,791	26,255	26,310	25,750	26,795	26,960
Total	*211,841*	*226,626*	*230,415*	*233,610*	*237,881*	*239,750*	*368,285*	*380,920*

Source: Higher Education Statistics for the UK, HESA

Table 3.2: Bachelors degrees obtained by subject, UK, 1994/95 to 2001/02 (percentages)

Subject	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
Medicine & Dentistry	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	2
Subjects Allied to Medicine	4	4	5	5	6	6	8	9
Biological Sciences	6	6	6	7	7	7	6	6
Agriculture & Related Subjects	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Physical Sciences	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	4
Mathematical Sciences	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
Computer Science	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	6
Engineering & Technology	10	10	9	9	9	8	8	7
Architecture, Building & Planning	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2
Social, Economic & Political Studies	9	9	9	8	9	9	9	8
Law	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5
Business & Administrative Studies	11	12	12	12	12	12	13	13
Librarianship & Information Science	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
Languages	7	7	7	7	7	7	5	5
Humanities	5	4	4	4	4	4	3	3
Creative Arts & Design	7	7	8	8	8	9	8	8
Education	6	6	6	6	5	5	9	9
Combined	12	12	11	11	11	11	7	7
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*

Note: Veterinary Science represents less than one per cent of students graduating for each year, and so has been excluded

Source: Higher Education Statistics for the UK, HESA

What is immediately noticeable is the reasonable degree of stability over the years in the proportions graduating with the different subject degree-types. There are some subjects that have increased their proportion of graduating students noticeably – for example education and subjects allied to medicine; both professions the government is trying to encourage. However, the data provides mixed results as to whether the expansion of higher education has benefited 'vocational' or 'academic' degrees more. When comparing vocational subjects, computer science has risen to represent six per cent of graduating students (from four per

cent previously), whilst engineering and technology has actually fallen, from ten to seven per cent over the period. Necessary in understanding such differences is the importance of student choice as a means of allocating course places, including the influence of student perceptions of what will lead to a lucrative and enjoyable career.

Higher education in further education colleges

It is not easy to precisely determine the number of students pursuing HE Bachelors degrees in FE colleges (see Parry and Thomson, 2002). But we can say that HE taught in FE colleges represents a significant and growing proportion. According to a HEFCE (2002b) report for the academic year 2000/1, for which the most recent figures are available, over ten per cent of students enrolling on HE courses, 241,235 in number, did so in further education colleges.

It is important to note, however, that the majority of these students are likely to be on non-bachelors HE courses — the type of degree this research is primarily concerned with. Parry and Thomson (2002) put the number of students in 1998/99 registered with a further education institution for an HE 'first' (*ie* Bachelors) degree at 17,000, although this figure may rise when individuals registered with an HEI but taught at a FEC are included. There were 30,000 such additional individuals, although we do not know what level of study they are at. Nevertheless, without being able to give a precise figure, we can say that the number of students doing Bachelors degrees in FE colleges is a relatively small minority. At lower levels of higher education, on the other hand, FECs are having a larger impact, and are expected to be important in the provision of two-year vocational Foundation degrees.

3.3 Labour Market prospects

Table 3.2 reveals the labour market advantages of obtaining a bachelors degree, with considerably lower rates of unemployment than among those with lower-level qualifications. Very detailed data is available on graduate destinations, through a survey of all graduates (the graduate destination survey) taken six months after the point of graduation. That report consistently reveals considerable differences in employment outcome depending upon the type of course studied. For example, some supposedly 'vocational' degree courses (particularly media studies) result in higher levels of unemployment than others (*eg* law).

To summarise recent trends in graduate utilisation, two terms are used: fragmentation and diversity. Mass graduate recruitment programmes by large employers (*eg* civil service, banks) have broken down, and recruitment of graduates now takes place in

Table 3.3: Unemployment rate by highest qualification, Spring 2003

	Unemployment rate
Higher degree	2.3
First degree	2.9
Other degree	2.4
Other (lower) qualification	4.7
No qualifications	8.9
Total	*4.9*

Source: 2003 March/May Quarter Labour Force Survey

smaller 'batches'. For example, in the civil service, individual departments and sections within departments now undertake their own graduate recruitment, meaning that there are many more potential entry paths for graduates.

There is also considerably more diversity, in part reflecting broader economic changes. Graduates are now undertaking lower-level tasks (upon entry to a company) than was the case ten or fifteen years ago. The reason for this is that numbers of graduates have increased threefold in just over a decade, and there are not enough 'high-level' entry posts to provide employment for all of them. Graduates are therefore needing to enter employment at a lower level and work their way up. Also, as part of a drive towards greater diversity, there is increased use of graduates by employers who previously did not employ any graduates at all. For example, partly as a result of government initiatives, SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises) are now more likely to recruit graduates than was previously the case.

Table 3.2 also shows that those with an 'other undergraduate' qualification (*ie* a higher vocational education qualification below bachelors degree level, such as an HNC or HND) are far less likely to be unemployed than those holding other (lower-level) qualifications. Indeed, those with non-degree HVE qualifications are even less likely to be unemployed than those possessing higher-level degrees (albeit marginally).

There is also clear evidence that possession of a higher-level vocational qualification below degree level, is associated with a higher standard of living than is enjoyed by those with lower level or no qualifications. Those with bachelors degrees will, within a few years of graduation, tend to be earning more than those who completed study with a lower-level qualification.

In strictly occupational terms, sub-degree level qualifications (*eg* foundation degrees and HNDs) are primarily intended for those in 'associate professional and technical occupations', although the extent to which qualifications map onto occupational level in the UK has been declining.

Table 3.4: Highest qualification by occupation, UK, 2003 (percentages)

Occupation level	Higher degree	First degree	Other degree	Other (lower) qualification	No qualifications	Total
1 Managers and Senior Officials	20.0	22.0	26.1	13.7	8.5	14.7
2 Professional occupations	57.9	35.8	47.2	5.5	0.5	12.1
3 Associate Professional and Technical	15.4	23.9	16.9	13.6	3.1	13.8
4 Administrative and Secretarial	3.4	8.6	4.8	15.1	8.6	12.8
5 Skilled Trades Occupations	0.8	1.9	1.5	14.1	13.4	11.7
6 Personal Service Occupations	0.8	2.5	0.8	8.7	7.9	7.3
7 Sales and Customer Service Occupations	0.9	2.6	0.9	8.9	11.6	7.9
8 Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	0.2	0.9	0.9	8.8	15.3	8.0
9 Elementary Occupations	0.5	1.8	0.8	11.6	31.1	11.8
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*

Source: 2003 March/May Quarter Labour Force Survey

Despite the increasing proportion of graduates employed in traditionally non-graduate jobs, those with higher education qualifications are significantly more likely to be employed in higher-level jobs. This is indicated by Table 3.4, which gives the proportions of those with each qualification 'type' at different occupational levels. Seventy-eight per cent of those with higher degrees, and 56 per cent of those with first degrees, were employed as managers or professionals. This compares with 19 per cent of those with a lower qualification, and nine per cent of those without a qualification.

4. Adjusting Higher Vocational Education to the Labour Market, Including Quality

4.1 Introduction

There are a range of policies, tools and instruments that are used to encourage the labour market relevance of higher vocational education. Although the focus of this report is the role of quality assurance (as an aid to labour market responsiveness), we will briefly review some of the other policies, tools and instruments in this chapter, by way of context.

4.2 Context

The most notable feature of higher education, in this area, is the absence of any co-ordination, control or central influence on provision. For example, there are no comparable regional or local structures to match those of the further education sector. Increasingly, however, HEIs (higher education institutions) are representing themselves en masse at regional level, with the new Regional Development Agencies and other organisations. They are seeking to influence the emerging regional skills strategies. It remains to be seen how individual HEIs will respond, and be influenced by, the priorities and skills agendas emerging from the regional level. Currently, there is little sign of much practical action taking place in response to regionally-determined priorities or issues.

Universities and other HEIs change quite slowly, and it can take years for particular policies, tools or instruments to have any impact at all. The approach taken is a cumulative and incremental one, whereby a whole series of 'levers' are pulled to try to bring about a more responsive (or adaptive) outcome. No single policy, instrument or tool is powerful enough to outweigh two factors: the primacy of student choice, and the autonomy of institutions to determine the content of their own provision. However, by using many policies, instruments and tools, it is found that some progress can be made in improving the way in which curricula reflects real-world needs.

4.3 Higher Education Institution strategic and corporate plans

At a strategic level, institutions produce long-term plans (varying from three to five years in duration) that spell out its mission, values, and main objectives and aims. These are usually called strategic or corporate plans. It should be remembered that because of the legislative reforms referred to earlier in this paper, the HEIs and further education colleges are autonomous corporations, and hence they have a degree of latitude concerning such things as mission and just how they prepare and present strategic or corporate plans.

These plans will normally situate the institution within a wider economic, policy and cultural framework. For example, they will address such questions as whether the institution has a distinctly regional or local mission, or if its primary orientation is national or international. If it is local, the plan may then review the main issues to be faced, for example is the area undergoing major economic restructuring, social dislocation, growth or decline? If the mission is national, what are the broad features of the national economy and educational system that may affect the institution? If a shift in mission or main aims are taking place, it will be through the strategic planning process that such issues are addressed, resolved and reported upon.

Of course, plans are heavily influenced by the likely amount of future funding available. This will be broadly known in advance through communication from the relevant funding council. In periods of funding growth, institutions will be prepared to take more risks in developing provision in areas where there may be growing labour market (as well as student) demand. New facilities or campuses can be planned for, and again these can respond to labour market demands (for example, by being located in geographic areas of expanding business and population activity).

In times of funding stasis, risk-taking is avoided. Development of new provision to meet labour market needs can be a risky venture. There can be a time lag before student demand catches up with provision, and employer take-up can be less than expected, even if skills shortages exist. Universities can lose money by being too eager to open up new provision to meet anticipated labour market and employer needs. Good practice is now recognised as involving quite substantial amounts of market research and market testing of new educational products.

4.4 Funding

The nature and system of funding of higher education looks set to change over the coming years, although it is not entirely clear how extensive the changes will be. Rhetoric from government and the

Higher Education Funding Council of England suggest that changes will be significant:

> *International competition and the increasingly diverse requirements of students, employers, government and other stakeholders will require a step-change in the way higher education is funded, managed and delivered.* (HEFCE press release, 14 March 2003)

Following the proposals set out in the Government's white paper, '*The Future of Higher Education*', HEFCE has published a consultation document broadly setting out a strategic plan for 2003 to 2008 (HEFCE 2003a). The consultation document gives four objectives that it hopes to encourage through the funding regime:

- widening participation and fair access
- enhancing excellence in learning and teaching
- enhancing excellence in research
- enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society.

Such changes would, therefore, have implications for the funding of teaching, research and 'third-stream activities' — for example partnerships between HEIs and business for the benefit of the economy and wider society. Funding arrangements in each of these three areas, and possible changes and implications for the labour market responsiveness of vocational degree programmes, are summarised below.

HEIs receive funding from the Higher Education Funding Council (England) dependent upon the number of students they recruit and educate, although there are a range of weightings predominately relating to course type. This means student choice is paramount; there is no government or other body deciding the volume and types of study they want to fund.

Grants to institutions are made once a year. First HEFCE calculate a 'standard resource' for each institution — an initial calculation of what funding would be, based on:

- the number of students
- subject-related factors (different types of courses require different facilities, and the funding reflects this)
- student-related factors (for example, premiums for additional teaching during the year)
- institutional factors (for example, premiums for old or small institutions).

The number of students funded for any one course within an institution depends on the number of students recruited and taught in the previous year, and the number of additional places successfully bid for by the institution. Institutions bid on the basis

of being able to fill the spaces for the course in question, and if they are unsuccessful in recruiting students, they will have their actual funding reduced (HEFCE 2003c). The use of the term 'resource', as in 'standard resource', refers to the HEFCE grant plus tuition fees to be paid by the student.

HEFCE then calculates an 'assumed resource', based on the amount awarded last year, adjusted for the new situation in terms of available funding, additional students, and any failures in terms of meeting the funding agreement last year. This last point is likely to be because they have failed to recruit or retain the number of students for which their grant was awarded. If the assumed resource and standard resource are within plus or minus five per cent of each other — to allow a little variation between institutions — the previous years funding, adjusted as above, is carried forward. Institutions outside this 'tolerance band' of five per cent are brought under it by adjusting student numbers or funding.

So, we can conclude from this that, for the most part, student choice is the primary lever for the allocation of funded teaching places. With a few exceptions, for example medicine or dentistry, the number of places funded for a particular vocational degree subject is not assessed by government on the basis of labour market needs. Bidding to HEFCE for funding for places for a new course depends on satisfying HEFCE that they can attract sufficient students, not that there is a labour market demand for the course. This looks set to remain the case, and the changes indicated in the consultation document focus on encouraging quality teaching, rather than adjusting the supply of places to meet the needs of the labour market.[1]

4.4.1 Funding for research

More significant change is mooted in the area of research funding. The government's white paper makes clear that research funding is to be further concentrated on institutions with high levels of internationally renowned research activity, as indicated by scores of 5 in the research assessment exercise. The government has argued that in order to keep, maintain and develop Britain's cutting-edge research position, scarce resources need to be more greatly concentrated where they can have the biggest impact — in the most research -ntensive institutions.

As a parallel argument, the government is emphasising that institutions should focus on what they do best, and in some HEIs this will be teaching rather than research.

[1] It is possible that government could attempt to encourage individuals to chose courses it deems important for the economy through financial incentives, such as the waiving of fees or the provision of grants. This has happened with postgraduate teaching degrees, but there is no suggestion that this will happen with any undergraduate degrees.

The response from HEIs with predominant scores of four in the research assessment exercise, indicating research of a national rather than international standing, has been one of strong criticism.[1] These HEIs stand to lose out considerably in the research funding stakes. Interviewees from the case studies (Part 2) tended to emphasise the importance of research activity amongst academic staff in keeping their programme responsive to the needs of the labour market, so it could be argued that moving funding away from less research-intensive institutions will have a detrimental effect in this regard. The government's response to such an argument, we can anticipate, would be that funding is already concentrated to some degree, and that good quality, up-to-date teaching can and does occur in HEIs that are less research intensive.

4.4.2 Funding for 'third-tier activities'

Third-tier activities, so called because they are in addition to the traditionally recognised activities of HEIs, of teaching and research, may have some impact on the responsiveness of the vocational degree programmes to the needs of the labour market. This is because HEFCE state that they wish to see greater links and collaboration between HEIs and outside stakeholders, in particular employers and regional development agencies, and are willing to provide funds to foster these links. The white paper explains:

> *'Effective knowledge transfer* [from HEI to stakeholders] *will lead to more jobs, through higher economic activity, and to a healthier social economy and a better skilled workforce. Increased interaction between HE and business will help to develop understanding within HE of the needs of business, and to build intelligent demand within business for the resources of HE. People involved in the interactions will themselves develop new knowledge and skills. There can also be benefits to widening participation and improving graduate employability.'*

Funding for these activities is likely to be dependent upon strategic plans put together by HEIs, so no single model of funding will exist. This makes speculation about the impact of such a move difficult; it is something that needs to be reassessed by future research.

However, it is worth noting that this is not an entirely new development. At present, a small amount of the HEFCE budget is discretionary, and must be bid for competitively. Such funds are not an allocation but a competition, and to win the competition, universities have to demonstrate that they are, for example, working closely with local businesses.

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[1] See the story 'Universities condemn HEFCE funding plans' from the Guardian Newspaper 13 August 2003, at http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/research/story/0,9865,1017921,00.html

The DfES' Higher Education Quality and Employability Division (HEQE) undertakes a range of developmental work in HEIs throughout Britain, and has a special fund that universities bid for to develop good practice in this area. For example, in most universities there is usually at least one developmental project that aims to improve the links between the institution and the local business community, and to improve the relevance of the curriculum (in maybe just one part of the institution) to industry needs.

The implication of these changes is that such activities will become more prevalent and more focused.

4.5 Higher Education Institution business plans

Institutions also have more detailed annual plans, sometimes called business or operating plans, which contain detailed numeric goals and financial projections for provision and other issues such as staffing, estates/premises, *etc.* These documents are usually confidential, but can be accessed by the funding councils and researchers investigating this area for approved projects.

Individual departments that seek to grow or shrink the student roll (student numbers) on a course, have to bid each year for that change. Central planning and management teams, and sometimes also academic boards, increasingly require labour market evidence before approving change. For changes in volume, the key indicators will be student demand, *ie* that well-qualified potential students are being turned away because of a lack of places; employer demand; and, even better, that there is evidence that rather than accept another course, they go to another institution where their first choice of programme is available.

However, systems and procedures are designed to mitigate against the powerful, but sometimes perverse, pull of student demand alone. Destinations data will also be examined, with questions being asked about how those graduates progress upon completion of their course. If local employers are a source of referrals (by paying for day-release study among their employers), then they will be expected to write letters of support stating that they believe there is a need for extra provision. Local labour market reports by organisations like Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) will be referred to, for any evidence they contain of trends in demand. National sectoral bodies, including professional bodies and trade associations, are sources of market intelligence, and a bid for additional student numbers would normally refer to such evidence as well.

Despite all this, once again there is a lot of evidence that in reality, it is student demand (and not employer and labour market needs) that is driving changes in provision. Universities and other HEIs often lack the skills and resources required to interpret labour

market information to change provision. There are also problems with the relevance and quality of much regional and local LMI in Britain that limits its usefulness for such work.

It should be noted here that the dynamics of course development and approval (and scrutiny of curricula relevance) are complex, and vary from one institution to another. In broad terms, there are two major 'process loops' involved: the first is the business planning process of the institution, which sets parameters for growth/decline/stasis in overall numbers, and also financial and other resource constraints. This is the envelope within which all planning of change takes place. However, there will then be an interlocking loop of academic scrutiny, involving layers of academic boards, who ensure academic respectability, relevance and rigour.

An issue of some sensitivity concerns the extent to which employers are able to assess their needs (of graduates) and the responsibility of academics designing curricula to provide a broad education to their students. This point is examined in more detail in the case studies presented in Part 2 of this report.

4.6 Good practice and guidance

The various bodies involved with the further and higher education systems have produced research and good practice materials that will help managers identify and respond to industry skills needs.

These have mainly been for the further education sector, but there is a growing interest in producing such materials for the higher education sector. For example, in 2001, IES published a guide for university planners on how to use regional and local labour market information in their work, and other work is going on in that same area at the moment.

There are many conferences and seminars on the theme of making university provision more relevant to employer and local needs, and these are instruments for disseminating the results of developmental projects and ideas.

5. Introduction to Quality Assurance in English Higher Education

> *'Although the debate about quality in higher education is international, as is the changing nature of the relationship between the state and higher education, the precise relationship between government and higher education in the United Kingdom enjoys some peculiarly British characteristics – peculiar, because of a prior historical situation in which the universities, to a degree unique by European standards, enjoyed an almost total autonomy from the state.'*
>
> (M J Harrison, *'Quality issues in higher education: a post-modern phenomenon'*, in *Developing quality systems in education*,. G D Doherty, ed., 1994).

5.1 What is 'quality' in English higher education?

Doherty (*ibid*.) defines 'quality' in higher education under six headings, drawing on the earlier work of Ellis (1993) and Cryer (1993):

1. **Quality Assurance** – a system based on 'feedforward' to eliminate potential errors, *eg* by ensuring that aims, content and resources are sufficient. (In this sense, Doherty is describing a range of planning activities that take place within universities).
2. **Quality Control** – a system based on 'feedback' to learn from successes and failures, *eg* by surveying and monitoring the views of staff, former students and employers concerning the standards and relevance of provision.
3. **Quality Management** – the process that actually activates and embeds quality systems (*eg* 1 and 2, above) within the procedures and managerial requirements of the institution.
4. **Quality Audit** – the activity of gathering evidence that quality procedures (*eg* 1 – 3 above) are taking place. This may be undertaken internally, or by outside inspectors, or both. It is important to note that a Quality Audit could involve inspection, or no inspection, and especially in the current environment, it might be more helpful to split this category into two: 4a – (hard) quality audit by inspection; 4b – quality audit by visitation and assessment of processes.

5. **Quality Assessment** — the (often contentious) activity of forming judgements on how well performance measures against set criteria.
6. **Quality Enhancement** — the purported continuous improvement model, whereby feedback always serves generally to improve quality.

It is possible to see elements of all these types of 'quality process' in higher education, indeed they are mostly interdependent. For the purposes of this discussion we will use the term 'quality assurance' as a cover-all for the above elements of quality (*ie* assurance, control, management, audit, assessment, enhancement).

Quality assurance, as we describe it, is an old (if not innate) activity that surely predates modern management science by many centuries. Scholarly communities, like other inter-generational communities of interest, tend to deliberately change what they do from time to time if they believe that things can be done better; they tend to learn from mistakes within and between generations; and they are typically governed and managed in a manner that requires, and thus enables, those in charge to observe important elements of what takes place. These are all consistent with fundamental qualities of many modern approaches to quality assurance.

Ultimately, the purpose of quality assurance, whatever the reality of the situation, is one of arriving at transparency over the educational provision offered — a point developed in section 5.4. However, for the purposes of this section it is necessary to understand that internal mechanisms within HEIs for assuring quality, were not born in the reforms of the 1990s. Institutions will have traditionally had policies to assess and improve the quality of provision.

One of the purposes of quality assurance reforms over the last ten years has been, therefore, to assess and codify the *existing* processes and activities that are unique to the culture of an institution (and that are part of its ethos and moral fabric). This codification enables comparison with other courses, departments and institutions. In other words, quality assurance attempts to codify so that it can make things understandable to 'outsiders'.

Two such mechanisms for assuring quality in higher education, developed independently of the 1990s reforms, which are important, are validation and accreditation. Validation is the process whereby an institution approves a programme; accreditation, on the other hand, is the process by which a professional body awards a particular degree the status of having reached some set standard. These topics are discussed in the next two sections.

5.2 Validation

Under Royal Charter, or Act of Parliament, each English university has the power to define for itself:

- the content of courses
- the skills to be developed through those courses
- how courses will be assessed
- whether new courses are to be allowed to run
- how the courses are to be reviewed.

Universities therefore have full responsibility for the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. Although the precise structure is unique to each institution, in most institutions quality standards are overseen by a senate, or academic board, or some combination.

It is a matter for each university to decide whether and how vocational degrees reflect the needs of the industry they serve, and how they adapt to, and anticipate, changing skill and knowledge requirements. However, and nearly always, institutions specify that course development, approval, revalidation and review processes should involve external expertise drawn from a relevant industry. Validation and revalidation procedures often require that labour market information be provided in support of course provision. Many institutions also involve external examiners drawn from industry in monitoring the standards achieved by students on courses.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education (section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review, QAA, May 2000)* explains its requirements for rigorous standards in this regard. However, it is at the non-prescriptive level of general guidance in the code (a section which is not binding, and provided as an appendix) that labour market responsiveness becomes explicit. Appendix 3 poses questions that it says QAA reviewers will be considering when looking at the validation and revalidation processes of an institution, which (amongst others) include:

Re: 'Evaluation of the intended learning outcomes in relation to external reference points and to the broad aims of the provision:

> *How do these relate to external reference points including relevant subject benchmark statements, the qualifications framework and any professional body requirements'?*
>
> Re: 'Evaluation of the means by which the subject provider creates the conditions for achievement of the intended learning outcomes:

Do the design and content of the curricula encourage achievement of the intended learning outcomes in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, subject specific skills (including practical/professional skills) transferable skills, progression to employment and/or further study, and personal development?

Is there evidence that curricular content and design is informed by recent developments in techniques of teaching and learning, by current research and scholarship, and by any changes in relevant occupational or professional requirements?'

Re: 'Evaluation of the assessment process and the standard it demonstrates:

What evidence is there that the standards achieved by learners meet the minimum expectations for the award, as measured against relevant subject benchmarks and the qualifications framework?'

It is clear from these questions that the QAA intends HEIs to possess quality systems that ensure that the needs of professional bodies and industry are considered as part of the process of academic approval, validation and revalidation. While the guidance is not binding, institutions would be aware that these were the kinds of questions QAA visitors would be asking about, and looking for evidence against.

Thus, while validation is essentially an internal quality assurance process, it is not intended to be one that is immune from external influence.

Validation is examined in more detail in Part 2, as HEI case study participants highlighted validation exercises as being of at least some importance in regard to maintaining employer responsiveness in degree courses.

5.3 Accreditation

In some cases, vocational degrees provide the basis for entry to professions, either entirely or partially. Professional bodies (*eg* chartered institutes for engineers, architects, planners, marketing professionals, human resource managers) and in some cases Royal Colleges (*eg* of physicians, dentists) determine the skills and knowledge someone needs in order to begin practice. They will assess the curricula of HEIs and set out the extent to which such qualifications meet their requirements. They also inspect provision, in a manner quite similar (if less bureaucratic and time-consuming) than the pre-2002 QAA subject review process. Depending upon how closely the curriculum of the HEI meets the criteria of the professional body, it will assess how much postgraduate or other education, training and professional experience a person needs in order to practice the profession. Professional bodies have their own accreditation committees and boards, which set criteria and approve recommendations from

their inspection panels. There is typically extensive industry and other employer involvement and representation in such activity.

A bachelors degree course that is only loosely related to professional body criteria, may in some cases offer no, or very little, 'exemption' from professional body exams, *ie* such graduates will need to undertake substantial further study, at degree level, before they can join their chosen profession. In some other cases, a course may offer complete exemption, *ie* a graduate (usually from a highly vocational course that has included a substantial and highly-structured element of industry experience) will be regarded as qualified to join the profession, albeit usually in some kind of probationary status.

Many professional bodies also have their own external visitors that monitor the standards of courses they accredit. This is, de facto, a form of external inspection, although it is of course voluntary; an institution that does not wish to have a course accredited will not be required to undergo such a process. Interestingly, in some cases, the same academics who serve as QAA reviewers also work for professional bodies as inspectors, meaning that the same individual may have:

- been inspected by the professional body, in terms of course provision at his or her own department
- been assessed by the QAA subject reviewers, in terms of course provision at his or her own department
- inspected a programme in another institution for the professional body
- assessed a programme in yet another institution for the QAA.

Our understanding, from our case study research, is that there is a degree of professional prestige associated with being an inspector or assessor, given that it implies possession of professional seniority, wisdom and judgement. Professional body accreditation and monitoring processes, and university validation and external examining processes, are increasingly integrated, on a voluntary basis.

We are aware of one case of a joint QAA/chartered institute inspection/assessment of provision with one institution, one pragmatic reason being that the same individuals were involved because they worked for QAA and the chartered institute. However, at least from the institution involved, we gained the impression that the double-headed inspection/assessment was a difficult process, because the two agencies actually had different needs and agendas. We understand it may have been a pilot or trial of the idea of joint visits by QAA and a professional body.

Whereas subject reviews by QAA (discussed in more detail in section 5.7.3 and in Chapter 8) could last up to five full days,

professional body inspections tend to be shorter but sharper; usually just a day. Professional bodies demand considerable literature on the programme and teaching in advance of their visit, however. For example, one chartered institute that accredits degrees explicitly requires the minutes of recent meetings of the relevant industry liaison committee for the programme, meaning that the existence of such a committee (and its meeting regularly) are actually basic requirements. By studying the committee minutes in advance, the inspectors are therefore able to probe in some depth as to the real substance and nature of industry involvement in course design. This same professional body (for electrical engineers) also requires copies of minutes of staff/student liaison committee meetings, so that it may scrutinise student views in advance of its visit; another sign that it takes its quality assurance role very seriously. (This particular case is elaborated on in section 10.5.2, which refers to accreditation of the engineering case study.)

It has been argued by some academics that professional body requirements and inspection can be more rigid and demanding than QAA subject review, for example by expecting particular entry grades of students who participate on programmes they accredit. Such requirement can pose difficulties for institutions, which have a mission to widen participation, given that they have an institutional tendency to lower entry requirements as low as is reasonable in order to attract to learning those who would not otherwise participate. Additionally, for some new universities with less prestige and resources, there can be a problem for some programmes that will rarely be first choice of any potential student.

Potential students who wish to enter a profession are often content to select a course that offers little or only partial exemption from professional standards, *ie* they accept that they will need to undergo subsequent education (at or above bachelors level) after graduation. There are many factors that will influence the choice of course, including the overall reputation of the institution and the course, lifestyle issues, and knowledge of graduate destinations. Many potential students have not yet selected a profession, and a course that is too tightly tied to meeting professional accreditation needs may sometimes be seen as lacking in academic variety and interest, or closing down options the student wishes to keep open. Additionally, many students seek to mix a range of subjects and disciplines in courses, and 'modular' courses make this very easy to do. It follows that by following, for example, a degree in French and marketing, a student is unlikely to study marketing in as much depth as a student who only studies marketing.

While some vocational areas are strongly served by professional bodies, others are not. Old professions, such as medicine, law, engineering, science *etc* tend to be well served, while newer and

emerging professions sometimes have divided or immature professional body coverage. It has to be remembered therefore, that while professional bodies exert powerful influence on some higher vocational education, in other areas there is little or no such influence. This was reflected strongly in the case studies in Part 2; the importance and influence of accreditation was high in the Librarianship case study, and low in the 'newer' hospitality and marketing case studies.

Into this vacuum of influence, the government has encouraged National Training Organisations (NTOs), which are employer led bodies whose main focus of work concerns qualification frameworks, occupational standards, labour market and skills research, and training activity at below degree level. However, during the late 1990s, NTOs became involved in the specification of occupational standards for vocational degree courses where there had been traditionally little professional body involvement. It is to be expected that the successor bodies to NTOs, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), will continue this work.

In summary, accreditation is a key quality assurance process, but it is voluntarily negotiated between individual HEIs and accrediting bodies. It operates at the level of programmes or specific courses within programmes, not at the level of institutions. Professional bodies use formal inspection methods using set criteria and objective marking systems that are available for all to study (for example, for the Chartered Institute of Electrical Engineers, full details including the forms used by inspectors can be found at www.iee.org.uk). However, as already mentioned, the importance and influence of accreditation varies considerably between sectors.

The concern of the QAA is primarily that the HEI has processes involved to make the most effective use of accreditation potential of courses, and that employers, potential students and actual students, are given reliable information about the extent to which programmes meet accreditation standards.

Note on non-degree level higher vocational education

Accreditation processes for Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas are similar to those for professional bodies, with Edexcel specifying curriculum content and skills requirements on the basis of dialogue with relevant networks of employers, National Training Organisations (NTOs) and, in the future, Sector Skills Councils.

5.4 Why is there quality assurance in English higher education?

5.4.1 Introduction

Why should transparency be sought, and why is it such a good thing as to outweigh any disadvantages? Doherty (*ibid*.) offers a simple explanation, reducible to one word: trust. His argument is that those politicians (and their policy officials) who presided over the expansion of publicly-funded higher education in the 1960s lacked trust in the self-governing academic elite who ran institutions. Taking his logic further, we could argue that quality assurance was to be the compromise whereby a reactionary higher education sector retained institutional and academic autonomy, and the suspicious taxpayer secured relevant and value-for-money educational and research services.

5.4.2 Breakdown of trust?

Although 'trust' is now a fashionable term in (human resource) management science discourse, we would argue that the term is largely misused in the debate about quality assurance in higher education. Politicians and policy makers neither trusted nor mistrusted those who led existing universities. Rather, they sought to agree necessary changes that would sustain major growth of the sector and justify the far greater call on public funds. A statement that politicians did not trust universities is predicated on the assumption that institutions were able to understand what politicians and policymakers sought from them; a highly questionable assumption. The state required a different as well as a larger higher education sector, and sought to grow this from the existing one — notions of trust or mistrust are irrelevant to such a procurement.

5.4.3 Employability and key skills

Another influence is the growing importance attached by government to the concepts of 'employability' and 'key skills'. At its simplest, the belief is that all educational courses can, and do, in some sense contribute towards the ability of an individual to participate in the labour market. Thus, arts and humanities students are increasingly encouraged to take up elements of 'vocational' education as part of their studies, to increase their immediate value to employers upon graduation. There is a wide discussion here about the blurring of traditional divides between the academic and the vocational. The issues are not just those of content/curriculum, but also pedagogy. For example, some students on first-degree courses are now encouraged to develop the teamworking skills employers require by completing some of their course and project work in small teams rather than alone.

To rather crudely summarise the government position, indeed that of all governments for some 20 years, it is that their investment in higher education needs to help equip graduate labour market entrants with more useful skills and capabilities than was previously the case. Since HEIs are independent bodies, the best way in which government can influence the 'vocationalisation' of some higher education teaching is through quality assurance mechanisms.

5.4.4 National (competitiveness) targets for achievement and participation

Government policy is to increase participation in education and training, including vocational education. National targets for educational participation and achievement do not distinguish between vocational or academic, but the overall consequence of the targets were for a sustained 'push' towards greater provision and participation across all types of education.

While the driver of this is national competitiveness, and theoretically it is demand driven, a growing focus is on the supply side, and connected to efforts to tackle what is now called 'social exclusion' (which used to be called deprivation). This is affecting providers of higher vocational education. In addition to needing to anticipate employer and labour market demands, they need also to consider ways of addressing groups in the population who are socially excluded, and who traditionally do not particulate in post-compulsory education.

Although England has, since the 1960s, produced a relatively high proportion of graduates, the 'competitiveness agenda' requires not only that there should be more, but that as far as possible, such graduates are equipped to contribute quickly to higher levels of productivity in industry and services. While the Department for Education and Skills is lead government department on education, and therefore for higher vocational education, in the area of competitiveness (and the contribution of higher education to it) there are other departments with an active involvement: the Treasury, and the Department of Trade and Industry. Their involvement increases pressure upon the sector to be capable of explaining its contribution to national competitiveness, and quality assurance systems (for example by requiring good quality management statistics) are an important instrument for such explanation.

5.5 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

Quality assurance in the modern sense was present in the polytechnic system, for example through the awarding body for polytechnic degrees, the Council for National Academic Awards.

It continued to develop in the new integrated post-1992 higher education sector, for example through quality inspection by the funding councils, and the (former) Higher Education Quality Council's Division of Quality Audit.

In 1996, a review of existing external quality assurance mechanisms for higher education recommended that they should be rationalised. In response, the government established the QAA in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for English higher education. (Although UK-wide in its remit, its service is different in England than in Scotland, and for the purposes of this project and report, our focus is on the English element of its work).

The QAA is a part of the higher education system, not external to it, and has senior academics and university leaders leading its committees and work. It is legally an independent body, not a government agency, and its funding reflects this — HEIs pay the QAA for its services, as do the funding councils. However, whilst the British state tends to use 'independent' agencies to conduct certain functions that would be performed directly by state agencies in other countries, it would be extremely naïve to think that the Department of Education and Skills does not wield considerable power over the QAA. This is reflected by the manner in which important changes to quality assurance were announced by the Secretary of State for Education in 2001, without first consulting the QAA! (see section 5.9).

The QAA is governed by a board, which oversees the strategic direction and conduct of the agency, and appoints its chief executive. There are fourteen board members, of whom four are appointed by the funding councils (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland); four are appointed by the heads of HEIs via their representative bodies; the remaining six are senior independent members who typically have high-level experience of the professions or management.

The QAA is based in Gloucester, with another office in Glasgow, and it has a staff of over a hundred. Its mission is:

> *'To promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced.'*

It is possible, therefore, to see direct connections between the QAA mission and the debate about whether, and how, the higher education sector lost the trust of others. The QAA role has been diverse, and is described as fourfold on its website:

- reviewing quality and standards — a topic we will detail in the next section
- providing reference points — *ie* working with the higher education sector to create qualification frameworks, subject benchmarks and a code of practice, and providing guidance

on programme specifications. Again, these are discussed further later in this chapter.

- advising government — the QAA advises on whether a non-university HEI may be awarded the title of university (and therefore that it is fit and able to award degrees in its own right, rather than deliver degrees that are awarded by universities)
- ensure that 'access' courses for higher education are high quality — as part of the government's agenda of widening the social base of those participating in higher education.

5.6 The 1992-1997 QA regime

A new system for quality assurance in English higher education was announced in March 2002, and began operating in October of that year. At the time of writing (August 2003) only two institutional audit reports have been produced as a consequence of the changes. We are, therefore, still in the early stages of the new review system.

This section briefly describes the system that the new one is replacing. This is not of solely historical interest, as some elements of the old system will be carried forward or adapted in the new system.

Prior to the formation of the QAA in 1997, there were three main forms of (external) quality assurance in English higher education, that is, quality assurance involving agencies external to the institution itself. These activities and processes were themselves relatively modern, dating in some cases from the 1980s and 1990s:

- academic quality audit — a process of review of institutions' academic quality assurance mechanisms, originally established by the universities themselves in the 1980s
- teaching quality assessment — was undertaken under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). HEFCE (established by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, outlined earlier in this report) has a statutory responsibility to assess the quality of education they fund, to ensure proper and efficient use of public funds. Prior to the formation of the QAA (who HEFCE contract to undertake the work necessary to meet their statutory requirement for quality assurance in HEIs they fund), HEFCE undertook this role itself
- accreditation — by professional and statutory bodies, as outlined elsewhere in this report.

5.7 The 1997-2002 QA regime

5.7.1 Introduction

Upon the formation of the QAA in 1997, two of the above strands of QA — academic quality audit, and teaching quality assessment — became part of an integrated approach to quality assurance. Table 5.1 outlines the various methods for assuring quality standards in higher education, as overseen by the QAA, and prevailing between 1997 and 2002.

Institutional and subject level reviews, and subject benchmarking, (which are of particular importance to this project) are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Universities became subject to institutional and subject reviews in 1992, and these tasks were performed by the QAA after 1997.

5.7.2 Institution-level reviews

The institutional review had as its starting point the stated mission and aims of the institution. Universities were then assessed in four main areas: quality strategy; academic standards; the learning infrastructure; and communications. As may be surmised from this list of assessment areas, the purpose of the review system was principally to assess whether institutions' infrastructure and policies were sufficiently rigorous and robust to fulfil their responsibilities, in terms of academic standards and the quality of the degrees and courses they offer. As was explained on the QAA website from 2001:

> *'The process takes as its starting point the assumption that institutions have appropriate quality assurance policies and procedures in place, and also assumes that they can provide convincing evidence that these are working to good effect. The audit checks the extent to which this is the case and that the methods used are sufficiently reliable to continue to provide stakeholders with the necessary assurances for the future.'*

To complicate matters slightly, as well as being referred to as Institutional Reviews on the QAA website, they were also more formally known as 'Quality Audit Reports'. In a sense, this name is more precise, as the process was more one of 'auditing' the quality of an institutions provision than reviewing a mass of evidence. This means checking system-level procedures with reference to activities at the lower level — for example, with reference to subject reviews. It does not, however, mean the more systematic process of analysing documentation and teaching across the institution as a whole, as would be implied by a review. Nevertheless the term 'institutional review' will be employed here, to make a clear distinction with institutional audits, which were introduced in 2002.

Table 5.1: QAA approach to quality assurance in higher education: summary of the old (pre-2002) system

Level of quality assurance	Quality assurance method	Summary
All institutions	Code of Practice	The QAA Code of Practice sets out a *'framework for quality assurance'*; a series of precepts and principles for higher education institutions, in relation to the management of academic quality and standards. It is not entirely prescriptive: institutions could 'adapt' aspects of the framework according to their circumstances, where this was seen as beneficial. The code assumed that institutions had systems for verifying quality, standards, and the effectiveness of their own quality assurance system.
Qualification type (across all subjects and institutions)	HE Qualifications framework	This framework categorises HE qualifications by five levels: certificate, intermediate, honours, masters and doctoral. It explains what can be expected from an award holder, for example a graduate with an honours degree, in terms of knowledge accrued and intellectual skills acquired. It is intended for the general public and employers, to aid understanding of qualification types, and HE institutions and external examiners, in setting and assessing necessary standards.
Subject (across Institutions)	Subject benchmarking	Subject benchmark statements were/are produced by a groups of senior academics convened and overseen by the QAA. They provide information for employers and the general public on the content of courses — the boundaries of what can be studied under the subject heading — as well as what can be expected from graduates in that subject.
Institution	Institutional Review Reports	Institutional reviews were performed for each higher education institution on a regular cycle. Taking the institution's mission statement as starting point, external reviewers (senior academics) assessed whether the infrastructure and policies of the institution were sufficient to fulfil their responsibilities in terms of academic standards and award quality. Universities were assessed on: the institution's learning strategy; academic standards; the learning structure and communications. The QAA Handbook and Code of Practice provided reference points.
Subject (Institution level)	Subject review reports	These review reports were conducted alongside institutional reviews, but for the subject level. Subjects were judged against aims and objectives set by the course provider in a self-evaluation document, in relation to — curriculum, teaching, student progression, student support, learning resources and quality assurance.

5.7.3 Subject-level reviews

From 1994 to the present time, with the exception of a very small number of outstanding cases, all subjects taught at HE level underwent a subject review.

The subject or, more likely groups of subjects, under review were rated from 1 to 4 in relation to the following areas:

- curriculum design, content and organisation
- teaching, learning and assessment
- student progression and achievement

- student support and guidance
- learning resources
- quality assurance and enhancement.

The subject provider would set out aims and objectives for the provision in self-evaluation documents prior to the review. It would be on the basis of whether these aims and objectives had been met, that scores would be awarded in the above six areas.

> *'As the above six areas are covered by the review reveal, there was no single criteria of 'labour market relevance' – partly the because review template applied to both 'academic' and 'vocational' degrees alike. Our research, however, indicates that under the old subject review system labour market relevance did play a role in the judgements made, as vocational degrees claimed their courses to be of labour market relevance in self evaluation documents, and were therefore judged against this aim.'*

Subject reviews played a pivotal role in the old QAA review system, and require deeper analysis than is possible in this section. For this reason subject reviews are examined in much greater detail in Part 2, with a description of the processes (Chapter 8) and case studies examining how reviews operated in practise (Chapters 9 to 14).

5.7.4 Subject benchmarking

The system of subject benchmarking developed during the late 1990s. The impetus was the National Committee into Higher Education, which recommended that subject benchmarks be used to ensure public and employer understanding and confidence in relation to the content of courses.

One of the explicit intended audiences for subject benchmarks are employers or, more realistically, their trade and professional associations. Subject benchmarks tell an employer, at least in outline, what can be expected of graduates from different subjects.

Subject benchmarks were piloted in chemistry, history and law in 1998, and business and management studies, engineering and geography in 1999. The remaining benchmarks were drawn up in 2000 and 2001. The benchmarking process required that small expert teams worked together, and the QAA's role was to facilitate such teams. One of the tasks of such teams, identified by the QAA, was to define the boundaries of what can be included under the subject title. This, it was hoped, would allow for diversity within subjects, rather than leading to prescriptive, narrow subject definitions. In addition to senior academics, the groups drawing up subject benchmarks consulted widely with professional and industry bodies, including the former National Training Organisations (NTOs), now re-cast as Sector Skills Councils.

Part of this benchmarking process was the formulation of statements describing the attributes and professional capabilities of award holders. The QAA suggests that such statements should be broad-based and formulated approximately around '*a graduate or diplomat should be able to ...*'. So, for example, the General Business and Management benchmark statement states that graduates are expected to have:

> *'Cognitive skills of critical thinking, analysis and synthesis. This includes the capability to identify assumptions, evaluate statements in terms of evidence , to detect false logic or reasoning, to identify implicit values, to define terms adequately and generalise appropriately.'*

There are also benchmark statements directly related to business, such as:

> *'Effective communication, oral and in writing, using a range of media which are widely used in business, for example, the presentation of business reports.'*

We would stress here that the benchmark statements are not occupational profiles *per se*, and are both broader and rather different than that. Variously, they detail the skills and knowledge required by industry, for relevant occupations, but that is as part of a wider exercise. All subject benchmarks can be found and studied at the website of the QAA (www.qaa.ac.uk).

Overall, the QAA has noted that subject benchmark statements tend to cover the following areas:

- '*defining principles*', which explore the '*essence*' of the subject
- '*nature and extent of subject*', establishing the boundaries of subjects that can legitimately use the title
- '*subject knowledge and understanding*'/'*subject skills and other skills*', which describe the expected attributes of a graduate in the subject
- '*teaching, learning and assessment*', which gives examples of how the subject could, and in some cases should, be taught. For example, a General Business and Management benchmark statement is that graduates should have had direct exposure to business, such as placement work.
- '*standards*' — this is a particularly important element of the benchmark process and identified as a 'task' in its own right by the QAA. In this section, the group is to give the 'threshold' standard for the qualification, *ie* what can minimally be expected from a graduate in the subject. Teams establishing benchmarks were also able to define standards that could be expected from 'modal' and 'top' graduates.

Because they are new, it has not been possible to assess the real impact of subject benchmarks. However, earlier research by IES suggests that HEIs were revising some course descriptions to

more closely align the terminology to that found in subject benchmarks. Whether subject benchmarks have had a significant effect on curricula or teaching methods within courses remains an unanswered question. However, validation documentation examined for the hospitality case study (Chapter 13) makes extensive reference to subject benchmark statements in justifying changes to provision.

It has also been suggested, during the course of our case study research, that some sectors of study, such as electrical engineering, have adopted more prescriptive forms of subject benchmarking. It has also been suggested, during a research dissemination workshop held in April 2003, that their introduction may have an important longer-term impact on quality assurance as they provide external reference points, and courses need to be justified with reference to these. This is not to say that subject benchmarks represent itineraries of what *must* be included within courses, merely that they provide a 'yardstick' against which provision must be explained and judged (for example through validation exercises).

5.7.5 Code of practice

An important suite of QAA documents exists that form the substance of much quality assurance work within higher education. Taken together, they comprise the QAA Code of Practice. These documents are not prescriptive, and they do not generally provide criteria against which quality can be assessed. Instead, they generally provide a series of principles and approaches that the QAA believes represent good quality. They provide reference points that can be used throughout the internal quality assurance work of HEIs, and help structure the deliberations of QAA reviewers. Some sections of the code have already been referred to in this chapter, as examples of how QAA believe institutions should safeguard quality.

The code of Practice is an evolving document, with sections being revised and added periodically. Current sections include:

- 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
- careers education, information and guidance.

More sections are in preparation, covering other topics.

There follow some further examples of how the code addresses issues of direct relevance to this project.

Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 9: Placement learning, QAA, July 2001

This section of the code addresses what is expected in terms of placement learning, that is, learning within the world of work. It sets out the general principles (or precepts), of which there are eight, and we highlight just two here:

'Where placement learning is an intended part of a programme of study, institutions should ensure that:

- *their responsibilities for placement learning are clearly defined*
- *the intended learning outcomes contribute to the overall aims of the programme*
- *any assessment of placement learning is part of a coherent assessment strategy.*

Institutions should monitor and review the effectiveness of their policies and procedures in securing effective placement learning opportunities. In implementing (this), institutions should consider:

- *encouraging placement supervisors and students to provide feedback on progress and communicate any concerns in a timely way to the institution*
- *periodically reviewing the progress of students*
- *using feedback from institutional placement staff, placement supervisors/mentors, external examiners and students*
- *establishing procedures within which feedback on the quality and standards of the placement can be received and appropriate action taken where necessary*
- *formal and informal means of gathering feedback from placement providers about the placement arrangement.'*

The code of practice does not appear to mention the potential value of placements as a means by which academic staff can retain contact with employers and obtain up-to-date feedback on the relevance of the course to industry needs. Earlier IES research has identified placements as being able to serve such a role, not just through direct contact between academics and employers, but also by debriefing placement students when they return.

Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 8:Career education, information and guidance, QAA, January 2001

This section of the code is intended to assist HEIs ensure that potential and actual students receive accurate and helpful information on how their study choices will prepare them for the world of work. Much of the code is relevant to labour market responsiveness, although it is probably not worth repeating here. However, of particular note are precepts No. 9, 11 and 14 (of 14 in total), which are repeated here.

'The institution should make clear in its information to prospective and present students how the skills and knowledge acquired during study are intended to be of use to them in the development of their careers. (Institutions should consider):

- *promoting the importance of skills development for student in relation to employment and lifelong learning through, for example, progress files*
- *making reference to statements of transferable abilities contained in relevant subject benchmark statements.'*

'The institutions should ensure that its career education, information and guidance provision takes account of developments in the employment market and work opportunities in the community at large. (Institutions should consider):

- *working with the core UK-wide professional career bodies, Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services; and The higher Education Careers Service Unit, to help develop best practice*
- *working with a range of professional and related bodies, eg the Guidance Council; Institute of Careers Guidance*
- *helping employers and other opportunity providers to publicise information about their organisations and about their opportunities for learning and work*
- *maximising and promoting the value of work experience and work-related learning to both students and employers*
- *developing ways to provide an effective exchange of information and improving understanding between employers, other opportunity providers, and staff delivering career education, information and guidance*
- *extending the career education, information and guidance network to include external resources such as employers and alumni who can, for example, offer insights into employer expectations and specialist career information*
- *disseminating, as appropriate, available labour market information to cover the local, national and international markets.'*

'The institution should ensure that data collected by the institution on graduate destinations informs its careers education, information and guidance provision. (Institutions should consider):

- *incorporating feedback from key stakeholders into career education, information and guidance provision*
- *setting appropriate targets in order that success in the provision of career education, information and guidance, or otherwise, can be measured and used to promote continuous improvement*
- *producing an annual report on the provision, performance and outcomes of the career education, information and guidance service. This should be publicised widely and considered in detail by the department*
- *collecting data, centrally and through academic departments, on graduate destinations that extends beyond the first destination requirements of statistics agencies.'*

It must be empathised that the code of practise does not represent a 'rule book' as such; instead, distillations of good academic practise. However, the fact these 'benchmarks' exist means that courses will be potentially in a position whereby they need to justify their provision with reference to the provisions in the framework. Given the current situation, this may be particularly the case during the validation process. It will also arguably, raise awareness of good practise and may influence HEIs to instigate changes. However, the truth of this assertion cannot be made at present due to the infancy of the code of practise, and in any case, would require considerable research.

5.8 Prescription and transparency

Overall, it can be said that the British system lacks the precision and transparency of, say, the Dutch system. For example, English subject benchmarks generally do not appear to be as vocationally — specific or detailed as Dutch occupational profiles. It follows that, in assessment (or visitation in the Dutch model), it is not possible for an English assessor to be as clear-cut or precise as his or her nearest counterpart in the Netherlands as to whether programmes do or do not meet a certain criteria of labour market relevance.

This point about prescriptiveness and transparency is indicated by an example from the case study. A member of a recent QAA subject review team drew on the QAA handbook in order to frame questions and help form judgements. In the area of labour market responsiveness (or anticipation and adaptation in the Dutch context), they sought evidence of an industry advisory committee for the programme. However, it transpired that the committee, if it had ever existed, was not operational, and thus — if a literal and prescriptive approach were being adopted — the programme might be deemed to lack adequate infrastructure with which to

elicit industry needs. However, the programme leader elaborated upon many links with industrialists and employers, for example through placements of students, recruiters of graduates, and those who had agreed to comment on syllabi etc. The inspectors requested contact details and privately telephoned these industry contacts to check that they were actually involved in the way the programme leader described, and also whether they believed the programme was responsive to their needs. They found, in this case, that all the contacts were indeed involved, and praised the quality and relevance of its programme. Thus, an initial apparent failure to comply with one standard (that there should be an industry advisory committee for the programme — which, incidentally, is typically an absolute requirement for accreditation by professional bodies in some fields) did not mean the institution was deemed to have inadequate arrangements in place. However, the subject assessors did recommend that the programme create a committee.

Throughout professional life in England, particularly outside the private sector, there is a certain but unspecified 'code', by which professionals will often give one another an element of respect and latitude, and the quality assurance regime in higher education is probably a good example of that code. Serious failure is confronted, quite directly and often with bluntness. However, there is a strong emphasis on compromise, empathy and shaving sharp edges (in language and decisions) that makes the system workable. Both sides (that is, the assessors and the assessed) appear to permit a degree of ambiguity in England that (from our understanding of the Dutch model) might be considered somewhat lenient or obfuscatory there.

5.9 Collapse of the 'old system'

It should not surprise any reader of this report that the quality assurance regime of the QAA met with a mixed reaction. Some people in ancient academic institutions resented what they perceived as philistine 'grey suit' auditing by outsiders, and some in modern institutions resented the bureaucratic nature and heavy resource requirements of meeting QAA requirements.

There was possibly a wider and more basic resentment at the perceived power of the QAA. Much publicity was, for example, generated by the resignation of the Vice Chancellor of Thames Valley University (TVU). A QAA report conducted by the agency on TVU, at the request of the university's board of governors, stated that the university was in:

> *'A position where its academic standards and the quality of its students' experience were and are under threat, and can now only be maintained by special measures.'*

As a consequence, the Vice Chancellor of TVU tendered his resignation. However, he claimed in a national newspaper that it

had been recognised privately by the QAA chief executive that the situation at TVU had improved, but '*an example had to be made and TVU was it*' (Guardian, 20 July 1999).

In retrospect, and probably unfairly, the TVU case has come to be regarded by some as the high point in the movement to require external quality assurance of higher education in England.

The debate regarding the workload and bureaucracy involved in subject-level reviews was particularly intense, and there was heavy lobbying by HEIs and others in the higher education sector to change or abolish subject-level review. The Russell group, which comprises 19 leading Universities, was particularly vocal in that debate.

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills announced a consultation on changes to the system, but effectively pre-judged some important findings by announcing, peremptorily, that subject-level reviews were to be drastically scaled back with immediate effect. This, we have learnt, caused much annoyance on the part of QAA staff, who felt that this scaling back of subject reviews had been imposed on them with little discussion. Most importantly, the Chief Executive of the QAA, John Randall, an advocate of extensive subject-based reviews, resigned.

A QAA and HEFCE (2001) consultation document *'Quality Assurance in Higher Education'* set the tone, seeking comments on ideas for a 'lighter touch' QA regime. The proposal was that in future, they should examine provision at subject level only for selected programmes within an institution, rather than assessing all of them by subject review. It was also proposed that programmes receiving high grades in an assessment could be given a less intense review the next time. Stalwarts of the system opposed this, however, arguing that staff and resource changes, and curriculum changes, meant that an excellent course could become mediocre within a five year period, and that no programme should be given such license. Critics argued that the so-called 'drill-down' technique was subject review by inquisition, and argued that even the mooted ten per cent of programmes (to be assessed) was excessive.

In the changes that were to go ahead, however, one area was to remain relatively unaltered in terms of quality assurance requirements: higher education programmes delivered in further education colleges. For these HE courses, the subject review was to remain, the implication being that there was a necessity for these courses to be more closely monitored than those delivered in HEIs. This represents a considerable number of students — over one-tenth of students enrolling on HE courses in 2000/01 — whose subject provision will continue to be reviewed by the QAA (HEFCE 2002b). However, most of these students will be enrolled on degree programmes other than bachelors; the type of degree this research is focusing on.

6. The New Framework

6.1 Introduction

In March 2002, the QAA released: '*QAA external review process for higher education in England: Operational description*' on its website (www.qaa.ac.uk), outlining a new quality assurance system which will now apply for English higher education. It is important to note that, unlike systems in some other European states, there was no Act of Parliament or law to bring in the changes. The changes were agreed between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), HEFCE, Universities UK, (representing the universities and higher education institutions) and the QAA. The system is not explicitly enshrined in legislation, nor does it need to be within the British system.

The QAA also published a *Handbook for Institutional Audit: England,* after the consultation exercise had been completed in 2002.[1] This outlines the institutional audit system in some detail, and for this reason is an authoritative key source, which is drawn on in this chapter. The new system became operational in the 2002/03 academic year.

There are five particularly noteworthy features of the new system, compared with the old one:

- overall, more focus on institutional-level responsibility and ownership of quality assurance, rather than external assessment
- the use of 'audit trails' within the institutional audit, 'drilling down' to the subject or discipline level to test whether institution-wide policies and procedures are operating correctly in practise
- renewed attention to the role, independence and rigour of external examiners; that is, those academics from other institutions who mark and comment on exam scripts
- external audit of processes rather than inspection of content and standards

[1] In Chapter 6, 'the handbook' refers to QAA's *Handbook for Institutional Audit: England (2002).*

- yet more transparency, with institutions having to make more information about quality available to the public, including the comments of external examiners
- the retention of significant reserve powers for QAA in cases where serious problems are uncovered, including steps that could ultimately result in the closure of failing institutions, not just the closure of failing programmes. The new system is a 'light touch' but not a 'soft touch'.

The impacts of the changes on ensuring labour market relevance of courses, which is discussed at the end of this chapter, are likely to be mixed. On the one hand it might encourage institution-wide policies to ensure labour market relevance of courses and the involvement of employers; on the other hand, as we shall see, it will entail a reduction in the degree of scrutiny at subject level. Such a reduction in focus at the subject level, it might be argued, reduces the degree to which the labour market relevance of courses is scrutinised (this is discussed further at the end of this chapter).

6.2 Audit

The QAA will audit each HEI on a six-yearly cycle. The terminology is important; the QAA will audit, not inspect or review. QAA institutional audits are analogous to financial audits, in that a evidence is selected to test whether *general* policies and principles are being applied consistently and effectively. Review, on the other hand, implies a reasonably thorough investigation into the quality and effectiveness of provision.

This is reflected in the QAA *Handbook for Institutional Audit: England*, which states that three areas are to be examined:

1. *'the effectiveness of an institution's internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms, in light of the agency's code of practice … and the way in which the quality of its programmes … are regularly reviewed and resulting recommendations implemented'*
2. *'the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information that an institution publishes about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its rewards'*
3. *'several examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work at the level of the programme ('discipline audit trails') or across the institution as a whole ('thematic enquiries'), in order to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the information being generated by these internal processes. As a general guide, the discipline audit trails are expected to represent some ten per cent of the institution's higher education programmes in terms of full-time equivalent student numbers.'*

6.2.1 Audit personnel

Audit teams comprise between four and seven auditors, depending on the size and complexity of the HEI provision. Each auditor is a senior member of staff nominated by their HEI, and selected by the QAA to conduct audits in institutions other than their own. A 'core' auditor conducts his or her activities at the level of the institution only, to ensure that the remaining auditors gather enough evidence from the discipline audit trails to test the effectiveness of HEI-level QA policies and procedures (it should be noted, however, that all auditors conduct their activities at the level of institutional procedures and policies, at least to some degree). Overseeing the audit is an assistant director of the QAA.

Although it is not expected that auditors have a specialist knowledge of the subject provision they may be investigating in the form of the audit trail, they may, if desiring a second opinion about the quality of a subject, call on the services of a subject specialist. This would normally be limited to cases where there were concerns about the quality of courses examined. Specialists would normally be academics, but the Handbook leaves open the possibility of selecting '*nominees of professional and statuary bodies or from direct applications from appropriately qualified and experienced people'*. This leaves open the theoretical possibility of individuals from employers being involved, but whether this will happen in practise remains to be seen.

6.3 The audit process

6.3.1 Preparation

Ten months before the audit visit, a digest of information on the HEI, published by the institution along set specifications, is provided to the relevant assistant director. The digest includes information on the HEI's management of quality standards as well as relevant reports published about the HEI by the QAA and other bodies. This would include an Institutional Self Evaluation document; a critical appraisal of quality assurance structures and processes. Students are encouraged to participate in the process at 'key stages', and this includes the opportunity to produce a written submission by student representatives. In this, they are encouraged to address the accuracy of information published by the HEI on the quality of its programmes and awards; information provided to students on what is expected of them; '*the experience of students as learners'*; and the involvement of students in quality processes.

Nine months prior to the audit visit, a preliminary meeting between the QAA and HEI takes place, to clarify matters relating to the audit and the basis upon which audit trails will be selected. There is an opportunity to discuss potential audit trails. This preliminary meeting provides an opportunity to meet with the student union and discuss their involvement.

Following the preliminary meeting and examination of the information digest , the assistant director will identify a range of discipline areas from which audit trails will be selected (further information on how audit trails are selected is in section 6.3.3). An audit team is then assembled.

6.3.2 Briefing visit and documentation provided by the HEI

A briefing visit, lasting up to three days, occurs five weeks before the actual audit visits, as an opportunity for the audit team to consider their roles within the team and gather additional information deemed necessary, verbal or written, from HEI staff and students. Following the briefing visit, the assistant director advises the HEI of the programme of audit and additional information required prior to the visit, drawn predominantly from that produced as a result of the Cooke Report (HEFCE 02/15).

The Cooke Report (2002), produced by the Higher Education Funding Council of England, has recommended the necessary information that institutions will need to gather and publish if they are to be released from the 'harder-touch', old QAA regime. Obviously, given the recent publication of the report, it is not expected that HEIs undergoing early audits will be able to provide all the information recommended. However, in the longer term, analysis of this stream of information will be an important part of the audit process. The information includes:

- **External examiners comments**. The full transcripts would remain confidential, but institutions will be required to publish summaries for each programme, using a 'checklist' that will enable a lay-reader to gain an informed comparison on whether standards for that course are at the appropriate level and standard. Currently, examiners comments are not available to the public, and this would be a major innovation.
- **Students views on the quality of courses, teachers and facilities.** A new national survey would be conducted annually, although it is thought likely that results would only be publishable at the level of institutions, rather than particular programmes or courses.
- **Institutional Learning Strategies and Teaching Strategies** are also to be made available to anyone who would wish to read them, together with summaries of the results of internal programme and departmental reviews, and any action promised or taken in response to a problem.

Of direct significance to labour market responsiveness (the British term, comparable to 'anticipation and adaptation'), institutions will be expected to make available summary information on links with employers and how these are used to help develop curricula.

Employers views on the graduates they have recruited may be included as part of this.

In addition to the above, institutions will be expected to summarise statistical management information (some of it already available, but often not in very accessible format) that will assist potential students and others better understand its work and services. This will include:

- student entry qualifications, including 'A' levels, access courses and vocational qualifications
- drop-out rates, progression rates and successful completion for full-time first (bachelors) degree students, in accordance with HEFCE performance indicators (including class of first degree obtained, by subject area)
- destinations data on graduates.[1]

6.3.3 Audit visit

With exception of small specialist institutions, the audit visit is to last five days. The audit visit is used to:

- read documention provided to support the audit (see above)
- explore the institution's approach to QA and the relationship between institutional procedures and their operation at the subject or discipline level, via audit trails and thematic enquiries
- explore how the HEI uses the code of practice and subject benchmark statements
- scrutinise some assessed students work
- examine accuracy of information published by the HEI, with particular attention to programme specifications
- 'exploration of the claims made for the quality of programmes and actual achievements of students, focusing not only on academic outcomes, but also on the ways in which students are treated and their opportunities to learn optimised.'

[1] This is potentially of considerable significance for labour market responsiveness. Currently, graduate destinations survey data in the UK is not satisfactory, and compares unfavourably with that in other countries, *eg* the Netherlands. However, there is work to improve the study, and in particular to resolve the problem of only surveying students at a six month snapshot after graduation. For some years, research by IES and others has pointed to a lengthening 'settling' period of graduates into the labour market, with two years (after graduation) probably being a more useful point at which to assess labour market participation of graduates than the current six month point.

On the final day of the visit, the audit team considers its findings in relation to the soundness of the HEI's management, reliability of its published information, and areas of good practise, all in relation to the quality of its programmes and standards of its awards.

The audit team confirms on the final day whether it will be seeking expert advice in relation to any of the subjects that have been audit-trailed. A letter is sent to the HEI within two weeks outlining the general findings to be elaborated on in the final report.

Discipline audit trails

The purposes of the audit trail, which have already been alluded to, are given in the handbook as being threefold:

- to provide verification that the Institution's quality assurance mechanisms are operating in the intended manner
- to provide '*a window through which the audit team can consider aspects of what is actually being achieved by students and the effectiveness of support offered*'
- to '*provide a direct means of comparing the claims made by the institution for the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information that it provides about quality and standards, with the experience of students and others who have actually used it*.'

As also mentioned, there is an expectation that between four and six audit trails will occur at each institution, covering approximately ten per cent of full-time equivalent students. A discipline '*may cover a programme, a cluster of related programmes, a field of study, a department, or another unit of review*'. Reasons for a particular discipline to be chosen as an audit trail are given as:

- it illustrates institutional processes
- it has interesting or innovative features
- there is a lack of clarity in the self-evaluation document about aspects of the quality assurance arrangements, best examined through this discipline
- there are possible weaknesses identified within the discipline
- alongside other disciplines selected, it enables the audit team to sample an appropriate range of provision.

A self-evaluation document is produced for the discipline, and presented to the audit team alongside illustrative documentation — for example, some of that mentioned in section 6.3.2. There discussions with staff and students at discipline level about the implementation of the institution's quality assurance processes. Furthermore, documentation is scrutinised for accuracy, as is the

content of courses compared against subject benchmark statements and the code of practise.

According to the handbook:

> *'Each audit trail results in a conclusion by the audit team about the extent to which the institution's quality assurance arrangements are operating in practise, at discipline level, in a way which ensures acceptable quality and standards.'*

If there are 'significant' discrepancies between documentation and the realities of the provision covered by the audit trail, specialist advisers are called upon to make a judgement. If, after closer scrutiny by the specialists, concerns exist, a full institutional subject review can take place. Audit trails are not the same as subject reviews — they do not examine in as much detail, and they focus on the operation quality assurance processes. This means looking for areas of concern rather than appraising the quality of provision.

Thematic enquiries

The handbook describes thematic enquires as '*explorations of the way in which aspects of the institution's quality assurance procedures work across the institution as a whole*'. They are optional, and can be conducted using information obtained at the institution level or during audit trails, if the team wants to check a certain aspect of quality assurance across a wider range of disciplines.

6.3.4 Judgements and the audit report

The QAA audit team will form

> *'A judgement on the level of confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's management of the quality of its programmes and academic standards of its awards, and though direct scrutiny of primary evidence, whether the institution is securing acceptable academic standards and quality.'*

The QAA has said that an institution that could not show '*strong and scrupulous use of fully independent external examiners'* is unlikely to win the confidence of its auditors, and that institutional use of independent external participants in internal review, at discipline and programme level, will be a characteristic of an institution that wins its auditors confidence.

The audit report that is produced after each audit will be shown in draft to the institution, to enable it to correct factual inaccuracies and add any commentary of its own. Institutions will provide what is described as a 'brief progress report' a year after the audit report, and another three years later, *ie* half way between its first and second audit. Where problems have been identified, an action

plan will be agreed and monitored, with regular progress reports to the QAA.

In extreme cases, failing institutions will be re-audited within a year, and a subsequent bad report could lead to HEFCE withdrawing funding. Effectively, the institution would be closed down, and one possibility would be that a better run institution would take it over and install new management. It should be noted that voluntary mergers of HEIs have been taking place, and the government education minister has recently said she expects there will be fewer HEIs in the long term, due to mergers and failing institutions closing.

The new regime is therefore a somewhat 'lighter touch' than the system it replaces, with far fewer visits because of the death of subject review. However, it is not a 'soft touch', and carries with it a range of potential risks and sanctions that institutions will strive hard to avoid.

6.4 Implications for labour market responsiveness

At the time of writing (August 2003) only three institutional audit reports have been published, for reasonably small, and in two cases, specialised higher education institutions.[1] It is too early to really say how much impact the changes will have on the responsiveness, or the accountability for the labour market responsiveness, in higher vocational degree programmes.

However, as we now have structure for the new audit system which replaces subject and institutional reviews, we can make some predictions regarding the impact. It is our estimation that the implications for employer responsiveness may be mixed.

On the negative side, the removal of automatic subject reviews for all HE provision — except that delivered by FE colleges — has reduced the amount of scrutiny on all courses regarding their relevance to employer needs. It was our strong impression from the case study research, that as vocational courses tended to claim in their self-evaluation documents that their provision was of relevance to the labour market, in general they were asked for evidence to back up this assertion (see Part 2). It is far from clear that such assessments were made on an equal basis, but we can infer that this encouraged course providers to, for example, formalise links with employers. Now subject reviews will not exist, so these questions will not be asked of course providers. Those subjects which are audit-trailed will receive a less-intensive inspection than if they had undergone a subject review; our

[1] These are The Royal Veterinary College, University College Chichester, and the Royal Academy of Music.

examination of the few institutional audit reports published confirms that they focus on quality assurance processes.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that subject review assessments of the labour market relevance in courses may have varied considerably *within* an institution.

Most institutions have guidelines requiring external (including industry) advice on curriculum design and on the updating of existing courses, and creation of new ones. However, our experience from research during this and previous projects, is that the substance of such industry input is extremely variable, sometimes being considerable, and in other places being entirely absent. QAA subject review procedures did not appear to shine a strong light on such activities, and our belief is that relatively good practice and relatively bad practice were possibly overlooked by reviewers whose attention was focused on other elements of provision, *eg* teaching quality. By focusing on how well and effectively programmes apply institution-wide processes, there would appear to be a new opportunity for QAA to encourage institutions to make the most of industry inputs into curriculum design, course review, and indeed, course delivery (in terms of industry placements).

We have outlined earlier the view that subject benchmarks are not prescriptive or even particularly detailed tools with which assessors can judge labour market responsiveness. The QAA (website) note on the new system underlines this point powerfully, as regards both the main audit and the sampled assessment of 4-6 discipline areas:

> *'Audit teams will … enquire into the way in which … Subject benchmark statements have been taken into account when establishing or reviewing programmes and awards. But it must be emphasised that the Agency does not view ... benchmarks as constituting definitive regulatory criteria for individual programmes or awards. They remain no more than statement of what the relevant academic communities consider to be valid frames of reference within which an honours degree in a discipline should be offered. They need to be used with particular care in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary context … They do, however, provide authoritative reference points … in programme specifications.'*

Of particular relevance to labour market responsiveness will be future revisions and additions to the QAA Code of Practice. While some areas of the code address labour market responsiveness, and we have outlined them in this report, it is probably the case that the topic could be addressed in a more comprehensive and integrated way as part of the code in the future, if the QAA and the HE sector decided that it was helpful.

Part 2:
English Case Studies

7. Introduction to Case Studies

7.1 Introduction

In Part 1, we presented an overview of the history of higher vocational education and quality assurance mechanisms, with reference to how higher vocational degree programmes remain responsive to the needs of industry. As Part 1 indicates, quality assurance procedures have undergone considerable change in recent years, particularly during the three-year period of the research project. This is perhaps best represented by the move from an emphasis on reviews at the subject level, complemented by institutional reports, to institutional audits which examine a limited number of subjects — in less detail — within an HEI predominately to test the quality assurance procedures of the HEI (see Chapters 5 and 6).

The new framework was only introduced this year, so we were unable to conduct our case studies on institutional audits. Instead, it was felt that there was much to be gained by conducting case studies of subject reviews. First, the previous review framework represented a model of quality assurance which would be of interest to readers and the EU alike. Secondly, our research partners in the other four countries were conducting case studies on their (closest) equivalents to the subject review system, so such a group of English case studies would enable direct comparative analysis. Thirdly, it was felt that performing case studies at the subject level would provide a window through which we could gain a better understanding of how academic staff in higher education feel their courses remain responsive to the needs of industry.

It must be emphasised that the information contained in Part 2 relates to QAA subject reviews, which have since ceased. A detailed overview of the processes involved in subjects reviews is given in Chapter 8. This elaborates on what was written in section 5.7.3.

The case studies were conducted in two institutions, with two subject 'programmes' in each. Consequently, the structure of the rest of the report is as follows:

- Chapter 3 gives an overview of Institution 1.
- Chapter 4 presents the case study of what we have described here as the 'Engineering Programme', covering a number of degree courses covered by a single QAA subject review at Institution 1.
- Chapter 5 is the case study of the 'Librarianship Programme' at Institution 1.
- Chapter 6 is an overview of Institution 2.
- Chapter 7 is the case study of the 'Hospitality Programme' at Institution 2.
- Chapter 8 is the case study of the 'Marketing Programme' at Institution 2.

The structure of each case study is consistent, and follows the conceptual framework provided by our Dutch partners, REVICE. This allows us the reader to make direct comparisons between the case studies presented here, with those in other country reports.

7.2 Methodology

7.2.1 Identification and selection

We started our identification of appropriate case study subjects by reviewing relevant documentation from the QAA, in order to identify higher education institutions (HEIs) and programmes that could potentially be relevant to the study. To supplement this, we have held discussions with the QAA concerning programmes and courses that have recently been involved in subject review visits by QAA representatives. This has elicited more up-to-date information than was available purely from published sources, such as the QAA website.

From these list of institutions and programmes, we created a shortlist based upon the following criteria, in discussion with the project technical co-ordinators at REVICE:

- how recently the programme was subject to review
- a representation of private sector industry (as opposed to just public sector) programmes, so as to most closely examine industrial relevance.

As the QAA subject review process has taken over eight years, we decided to target only those programmes that had been assessed in the most recent years. This, it was hoped, would allow us to obtain relatively recent information, and interview individuals with clear recollections of the subject review for their programme.

We obtained approval from two English HEIs to study:

- two discrete programmes areas
- central (institution-wide) quality assurance measures that impact on programme-level quality assurance.

7.2.2 Research

Overall, the research for each case study included the following:

- in-depth interviews with academic staff (including course leaders)
- telephone and e-mail discussions with a number of staff with either quality assurance roles (institution-wide) or programme-level responsibility
- the scrutiny of QAA subject review reports
- the inspection of documentation provided for the QAA subject review by the course providers
- reference to QAA institutional review reports
- the review of Institution/department internal documentation including, for each case study, specifications of courses/ modules, and internal quality assurance procedures. Examining re-validation documentation for two of the case studies
- analysing subject benchmark statements (where they exist for that area of study)
- examining accreditation documentation produced by professional bodies.

In addition to this, for the Engineering Programme we:

- observed two meetings of the departmental Industrial Advisory Board
- scrutinised minutes and documentation of the Industrial Advisory Board
- observed industrialists meeting students as part of structured liaison arrangements, and also held discussions with both industrialists and students during a visit of the Industrial Advisory Board.

Luckily, QAA subject reviews were heavily documented. The subject review reports, as well as QAA documentation on the review process, is freely available, and there is a wealth of information available on internal institutional/department quality assurance procedures and policies. Interviews with academic staff proved very useful for obtaining insights into the process itself, and provided useful, undocumented information about how much emphasis was placed on the vocational relevance of programmes.

8. The Subject Review Process

8.1 Rationale

The information contained in section 2 reflects the QAA subject review system which operated from 1997 to 2002, as this is the period in which the subject reviews under investigation were conducted. As outlined in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the old QAA review framework has since been replaced by a new system, the apex of which is the institutional audits. The information in Chapter 8 is, therefore, of a Subject review system which has ceased to exist.

According to the *Handbook for Academic Review* (QAA 2000), which is a key source in this section, assessment by the agency has three main purposes:

- to secure value from public investment, by ensuring sufficiently high quality standards, encouraging rectification of shortcomings, and informing funding judgements
- to encourage improvements in the quality of education, through the publication of subject review reports and subject overview reports
- to provide effective and assessable information to the public on the quality of HE.

8.2 Preparation for the review

The subject review process started with each English higher education institution completing a 'scope and preference' form. This form collected information on the range of higher education (HE) courses offered in the institution; units/modules included in each HE course; the numbers of students as full-time equivalents (FTE) in each programme; and preferences for when subject reviews were to take place and the subjects to be reviewed together.

According to the handbook, the agency attempted to accommodate preferred timings for subject reviews, and encouraged subject providers to coincide the assessment with other quality exercises, such as validation or accreditation exercises, to minimise

duplication of workload. This was the case for the Engineering Programme. As one interviewee explained:

> *'We had an accreditation exercise at the same time* [as the QAA subject review]. *It was an attempt to decrease the workload because the* [accreditation] *team would use the same documentation as the QAA team.'*

After the scope and preference forms were returned, the QAA now had to ascertain how long the review visit would need to be to gather enough information on the quality of provision. In making this judgement, they would look at the scope and preference form, getting a feel of the complexity of provision, and examine any institution-level audits that had been performed, to assess how much confidence could be placed in the quality assurance procedures of the institution. In earlier reviews, such as that for the Engineering Programme, no such audit would have been available, so the QAA would have completed an 'initial profile'. This compiled whatever existing information was available, for example results of previous subject reviews and accreditation exercises. Where evidence was provided of good practise in the past, with firmly enshrined and effective quality assurance processes, the review was anticipated to be shorter and less intensive.

Six months before the start of each academic year, the QAA discussed with the institution the length of the review, and when visits were to take place. After agreement had been reached, subject review teams were assembled to perform the reviews.

8.2.1 Subject review teams

Subject reviews were conducted by teams of subject specialists, which were composed by the QAA from a register of specialists who had been approved by the agency. These individuals were overwhelmingly from academia, although in some instances members from relevant industry may have been included. This was the case for the review of the Engineering Programme which, according to one interviewee, had one or two subject specialists from industry.

It is important to note, however, that input from industry appears to have occurred relatively irregularly, reducing the potential influence of industry on education from this route. The Hospitality Programme was not reviewed by any industrialists, for example, despite attempts by the QAA to involve such individuals. One interviewee felt this was because '*it is difficult for employers to ... really know what to make of the academic processes – they don't understand the academic environment*'. This will, arguably, have been less true for industrial sectors requiring a higher level of education, such as engineering.

Each team was headed by a review co-ordinator, who was drawn from a pool of individuals who had been nominated by and seconded from a higher education institution (HEI), or who replied to an advert. Review co-ordinators must have had experience of higher education, and been able to conduct eight reviews over the course of a year. Our fieldwork has indicated that these individuals were often semi-retired from the higher education sector.

In addition to the review co-ordinator, for each review the number of subject specialists required varied depending on the number of students covered by the subject review in question, and the complexity, nature and scope of provision. As a general rule, three subject specialists were required where there were 30-250 FTE students, and the number increased until there are six for subjects with 1,000+ students. Obviously this would vary according to the complexity of provision. Subject specialists were selected so that a broad range of specialisms were covered by the review team.

Inevitably, the role of review co-ordinators and subject specialists differed. Subject specialists were selected because they had the technical expertise to judge the subject provision. Correspondingly, specialists were required to read relevant documentation before the review, participate in visits to the provider to gather and test evidence, contribute notes and share findings amongst the team, and make judgements on quality standards.

Review co-ordinators, on the other hand, had a more organisational role, and did not require specialist knowledge of the subject being reviewed. The handbook gave their responsibilities as providing an overview of the process, helping specialists apportion their time wisely amongst activities, and writing the first draft of the report based on specialists' notes.

Because of the organisational nature of the co-ordinators' role, they were required to have knowledge and understanding of HE (for example an awareness of current teaching methods and curricula), and the ability to manage small teams. Subject specialists, on the other hand, were required to have knowledge of the subject area, in addition to five years experience of teaching in, or close contact with, HE. Both co-ordinators and specialists were required to attend a two day residential course, but co-ordinators received additional induction training and attended QAA workshops and conferences.

Although subject specialists were provided with expenses, they were not paid for their input. From our fieldwork, we identified that potential incentives for participating included the opportunity to discover how subjects were taught in other universities, and to find out how the QAA subject review process worked. An interviewee from the Hospitality Programme, who had been a

subject specialist herself, said that the experience was useful when her department underwent a subject review.

After the review team had been selected, the institution was then informed of its membership and given four weeks to lodge any objections due to a conflict of interest. According to an interviewee with experience as subject specialist in a review team, it was a simple process to remove yourself from a review panel for this reason, or have someone else removed.

8.2.2 Facilitators

Institutions were encouraged by the QAA to nominate a subject review 'facilitator'; somebody from outside the department or school of study who liased between the reviewers and the subject staff. These individuals, in most cases those with experience of HE teaching or senior administration, were expected to have an extensive knowledge of their institution's policies and structures, and experience of quality assurance procedures. As an example, in one of the case study institutions the facilitator was a 'staff development officer', working across the institution as a whole.

The liaison on the part of the facilitator was to ensure that the reviewers could reach a '*clear and accurate understanding of the structures, policies, priorities, and procedures of the institution, and the nature of the provision*'. The facilitator was involved in discussions about the intensity and length of the review before the event. During the review, the facilitator monitored visits, and remained in contact with the review co-ordinator, making sure that information was received. Facilitators could also attend meetings, and contribute where this aided understanding.

8.2.3 Self-evaluation

After the broad parameters of the review had been agreed, for example when it was due to happen; the intensity of the review; and the reviewers on the team, the subject provider[1] was asked to produce a self-evaluation document on the courses covered by the review. This was submitted approximately one month before the start of the academic year in which the subject review was due to take place.

The self-evaluation was intended to be a critical assessment of the subject provision by the subject provider. It was expected to place the programme in the context of the broad parameters of the subject, as set out in the relevant subject benchmark statements, the wider qualifications framework, and the QAA Code of practice (Chapter 5).

[1] The term 'subject provider' refers to academic staff who deliver the academic provision covered by the subject review.

Table 8.1: The structure and coverage of self-evaluations

Section	Sub-section	Explanation
Overall Aims of subject provision	N/A	Statements on the overall aims of subject provision. For example, the Engineering Programme lists: *'to offer a range of professionally and vocationally orientated undergraduate and postgraduate courses which seek to implement the University mission within the discipline of electrical and electronic engineering'.* (Max 500 words)
Evaluation of the subject provision	Learning outcomes	Addresses the appropriateness of intended learning outcomes relating to overall aims listed above (intended learning outcomes in appendix, see below). Is also asked to put this in the context of external reference points, primarily subject benchmark statements.
	Curricula and assessment	Evaluates the effectiveness of **curricula** in enabling the achievement of intended programme outcomes. For example, *'the appropriateness of course content in relation to the level of the award'* and the *'inclusion of recent developments in the subject'.* Also evaluates **assessment** in terms of its effectiveness in measuring achievement of the intended outcomes, for example *'discriminating between different categories of performance'.*
	Quality and learning opportunities	Evaluates the effectiveness of **teaching and learning** in relation to programme aims, for example the *'the range and appropriateness of teaching and learning' and 'the quality of learning materials provided'.* Also assesses the effectiveness of **strategies for student support** and progression, for example, *'identification of and action on any special learning needs' and 'feedback [mechanisms] to students on their progress'.*
	Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality	Concerns the effectiveness of measures taken to maintain and enhance quality standards. **Quantitative evidence** is to be given, for example statistics on progression and completion rates, and first employment destinations of students. **Qualitative information** is also to be given, perhaps feedback from students, staff, and employers of ex-students, or external examiners/accreditation reports.
Appendix	Programme specification	Sets out the **intended learning outcomes** of the programme and the teaching, learning and assessment methods used to bring these about. Statements on learning outcomes are addressed as what a typical learner may have achieved. To give a possible example: *'A typical learner will have built up an awareness of current commercial and industrial practices and the current state of technology'.*

Note: quotes in italics are taken from QAA (2000), the handbook for academic review

Source: Adapted from information in QAA (2000)

The self-evaluation was therefore contextualised by the subject benchmark statements and QAA Code of Practice. If the self-evaluation was deemed insufficient for the purposes of the review, in terms of information provided, the subject provider could in theory be asked to re-write the document. Table 8.1 gives an overview of the content of self-evaluation documents.

8.2.4 Judgements and criteria of the review

Judgements about the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities were to be based on:

- the content of the self-evaluation, and its aims and intended learning outcomes[1]
- the subject parameters set in the relevant subject benchmark statements
- prescribed standards in the qualifications framework and QAA Code of Practice.

In this way, course provision was judged against the stated aims and objectives set out in the self-evaluation document. For example, the Engineering Programme self-evaluation specified that one of its aims was to 'o*ffer appropriate opportunities for study to a wide range of applicants… wishing to study state of the art topics within electrical, electronic and broadcast engineering.*' In the course of our fieldwork, one interviewee stated that because they used the words 'state of the art', they were judged against this; had they not used these words, they would not have been.

According to the QAA, the overriding basis of judgements made by subject reviewers were based on academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The handbook states that judgements about academic standards were based on:

> *'The appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes set by the subject provider in relation to the Subject Benchmark statements, qualification levels and the overall aims of provision; on the effectiveness of curricular content and assessment arrangements in relation to the intended learning outcomes; and on actual student achievement.'*

Judgements about the quality of learning opportunities, on the other hand, examined:

> *'The effectiveness of teaching and learning opportunities provided; on the effectiveness of the use of learning resources (including human resources); and on the effectiveness of the support provided to students to enable them to progress within the programme.'*

The intention was, therefore, that judgements were to be reached on the suitability of aims and intentions guiding provision, the processes and ability to meet these aims and objectives, and on objective factors, such as whether they met the requirements of the code of practice and the subject benchmarks.

The judgements were made regarding the following aspects of provision (note the similarities in structure to the self-evaluation):

- curriculum design, content and organisation
- teaching learning and assessment
- student progression and achievement

[1] 'Intended learning outcomes' and 'objectives' are used interchangeably by the QAA, and this is reflected in this research report.

- student support and guidance
- learning resources
- quality assurance and enhancement.

The first three aspects of provision listed will have had some relevance to the industrial responsiveness of provision, although the degree to which this was true depended in part on what the self-evaluation revealed. 'Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation' may have, for example, recorded whether students participated in industrial placements, and whether there were any formal links with industrialists. Under 'Teaching Learning and Assessment' a report may describe how students' working methods are intended to simulate industrial practises, if this is included in the self-evaluation. 'Student Progression and Achievement', on the other hand, will record the proportion of ex-students who have acquired relevant work, thereby inferring something about the relevance of the education received.

In each of the six areas, the provision was graded from one to four, as follows:

1. The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.
2. This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.
3. This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.
4. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

8.3 Conducting the review

In section 8.3, we explain the process used for conducting the reviews. The evidence for judgements was obtained in four main ways:

- through visits and meetings, both with staff and students
- by observing teaching, with prior arrangement from the lecturer
- by inspecting student work, predominately to see if student achievement matches the intended learning outcomes for the programme
- by analysing documents and data provided by the subject provider.

Documents and data to be analysed may have been wide ranging, as evidence of assertions made by the subject provider was required. In addition to providing the self-evaluation document before the review, the subject provider also needed to have forwarded all the prospectuses relevant to the programme. At the initial meeting with the subject provider, there will have been a discussion about the kinds of documents that were, be provided. Our fieldwork has identified that staff got into the habit of assembling paper evidence relating to how the subject is provided, in advance and anticipation of the review. For example, for the Engineering Programme, evidence was assembled in subject box files for easy access of reviewers. This included the minutes of Industry Advisory Board meetings.

Such documentation may have included:

- Subject or programme handbooks. This may include 'quality handbooks' which set out the procedures to ensure quality provision, either across the institution as a whole (as was the case in Institution 2), or for the school (as in the Engineering Programme).
- Curricular documents, explaining how modules or units are organised.
- Subject monitoring reports, either from external sources (for example, accreditation reports) or from within the institution (*eg* subject validation).
- Statistics, from surveys of present students on the quality of provision and courses, on student intake and progression, or from past students on their employment destinations.
- Minutes from meetings, for example of those attended by employers under the guise of an Industry Advisory Board (as in the Engineering Programme), or from meetings of student liaison committees.

The handbook provided questions and prompts that were to be used during the review process, to ensure that all the appropriate areas were covered by the subject review. Questions and prompts for the review cover seven main areas.

The first, 'aims and outcomes', evaluates the intended learning outcomes in relation to external measures. For example, questions included 'what are the intended learning outcomes for the programme' and 'how do they relate to external reference points including relevant subject benchmark statements, the qualifications framework and any professional body requirements'. In this way, the handbook does ask the reviewers, albeit in vague language, to consider whether the provision meets industry (or 'professional body' requirements).

The main question for the second area, 'curricula', asks:

'Do the design and content of the curricula encourage achievement of intended learning outcomes in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, subject specific skills (including practical/professional skills), transferable skills, progression to employment and/or further study and personal development?'

Once again, reviewers were asked to consider skills appropriate to industry ('professional skills'), and in addition the reviewers are asked to assess whether curricula content is informed '*by any changes in the relevant occupational or professional requirements*'. However, there were no firm rules on how this should be assessed.

Under 'assessment', reviewers were asked to consider whether the assessment procedures allowed students to demonstrate their achievements in relation to the intended outcomes, and be distinguished by different levels of achievement. 'Enhancement' addressed how subject providers review provision in an attempt to enhance standards, and the adequacy of such procedures.

In the area of 'teaching and learning', reviewers were led to consider the effectiveness, suitability, and level of depth of teaching in relation to curriculum content and aims. 'Student progression' asked whether there is a strategy for supporting students, which is relevant to the profile of the students, and whether it is effective. Evidence for this area may include documentation on support functions, and data on student progression rates.

Finally, subject reviewers were asked to consider how effectively and appropriately 'learning resources' were deployed in meeting the aims of the provision. This would cover the suitability of staff expertise in delivering the curricula, the effectiveness of the use of support staff, and procedures in place for staff development.

8.3.1 The output

Meetings were held, in which the review team swapped notes and observations from their input into the review. Judgements were reached collectively. Written-up notes from each team member were sent to the review co-ordinator, who used them to write a first draft of the report. This was then shared with the subject provider and the subject specialists in the review team, to check for factual accuracy and for comments. Amendments were then made. The finished report was of approximately 4,000 words.

9. Institution 1

9.1 Description of institution

Institution 1 was formed as a polytechnic in the early 1970s, combining existing colleges of technology and arts. After this date, colleges of education and nursing were incorporated. University status was achieved in 1992, following the Further and Higher Education Act passed earlier that year. As is often the case with former polytechnics, the university places particular emphasis on vocational education. As the university's mission statement notes:

> '[the university] *seeks to be an accessible, dynamic and responsive community of higher education with special strengths in professional. and vocational education, applied research and consultancy.'*

The university is organised into six faculties, each of which has three schools of study. Engineering is one such school of study; part of the wider science and engineering faculty.

There is a relatively large student population — over 18,000 in the academic year 2000-1. There is also a high proportion of part-timers (35 per cent), females (62 per cent), and individuals over the age of 21 (55 per cent).

10. Engineering Programme

10.1 Institution

The Engineering Programme is that provided by Institution 1, a description of which is given in Chapter 9.

10.2 Description of programme

The review in 1998 covered electrical and electronic engineering. For the purposes of the research, 'the Engineering Programme' refers to all BEng degrees in electrical and electronic engineering at Institution 1:

BEng (Hons) in Electronic Engineering

BEng (Hons) in Electrical and Electronic Engineering

BEng (Hons) in Electronic and Computer Engineering

BEng (Hons)in Electronic and Broadcast Engineering

BEng/dipl Ing (Hons) Electrical Power Engineering.

All the above degrees have common and compulsory units for the first two years. The title of the degree depends on the courses taken in the final year.

Despite the focus on electrical and electronic engineering, many of the observations of interviewees are of direct relevance to mechanical engineering, as they are now housed in the same school.

At the time of the review, there were approximately 250 students on the degrees being reviewed (which also includes MEng. and HND).

The school had around 20 academic staff. The engineering school has a relatively large proportion of non-natives, compared with the university as a whole. The numerical bias toward women across the university as a whole is also reflected in the engineering school, perhaps not surprisingly given the subject area.

10.3 The quality of the programme

10.3.1 Results of the subject review

Table 10.1 gives scores awarded for the Engineering Programme. The Engineering Programme received the maximum score in relation to student support and guidance, and learning resources. In relation to 'student support and guidance', the report noted that the induction programme for new students was good, and each student had a personal tutor for advice on academic matters. Furthermore, supervision for project work, which makes up a large proportion of assessed work, was time consuming but managed well. In regards to 'learning resources', the report makes reference primarily to the effective use of facilities — library, work areas, and computers — although it does praise the number of technicians. The deployment of academic staff is, interestingly, not mentioned.

In all other areas, the Engineering Programme scores 3, meeting the overall objectives but with room for improvements. On 'curriculum design, content and organisation' it records the structure of the courses: all BEng courses have the same compulsory units for the first two years, with students moving to more specialised areas in the final year. It was also noted that placements were available, courses were accredited by the Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE), and project work, often in groups, made up the bulk of the assessment. It also mentioned that there was an Industrial Advisory Board (IAB), which was made up of senior engineers in the local area, and a professor was seconded from industry. On the whole, the curricula was praised as being 'innovative', but some syllabuses lacked coherence and appeared idiosyncratic. It was also noted that provision was not 'state of the art' as the self-evaluation claimed.

Table 10.1: Scores received in the QAA Subject reviews for the engineering programme

Aspect of provision	Score
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	3
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	3
Student Progression and Achievement	3
Student Support and Guidance	4
Learning Resources	4
Quality Management and Enhancement	3

Note: **A score of 4**: 'This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.'
A score of 3: 'This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.'
A score of 2: 'This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.'
A score of 1: 'The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.'

Source: QAA Subject Reviews

For 'teaching, learning and assessment' it was noted that there was a teaching and learning strategy document, which stated that teaching methods were varied according to appropriateness for that topic, and students were to plan their own progression. All new teaching staff must have undergone a teaching course, and this was reflected in the good overall methods employed in the 25 classes observed. A heavy reliance on project work — accounting for 75-85 per cent of assessment — makes it easy for students to plagiarise, and difficult for staff to distinguish between the input and achievements of different students. Close involvement of external examiners was recommended.

In relation to 'student progression and achievement' it was noted that drop-out rates were high, despite clear and understood guidelines for student progression. It was recommended that the subject provider considers being more selective in accepting entrants, and extra support be given for those at risk of dropping out.

Finally, the report was broadly complimentary about 'quality assurance and enhancement' policies. There were established and effective committees with responsibility for approving changes to course provision, and for dealing with quality assurance issues in a 'holistic' way. Validation work was devolved to faculty level. On a more negative note, quality assurance processes have failed to deal with the high level of student withdrawal.

10.3.2 Verification points used

The aspects of provision for which scores are awarded were set by the QAA, and were identical for each subject review. The six aspects are explained in their entirety in section 8.2.4. Judgements about provision, which result in the scores being given for each aspect, will, in theory, be based primarily on the aims and intended learning outcomes set out in the self-evaluation document, and the suggestions about curricula content and student achievements given in the subject benchmark statements. In reality, at the time of the review, subject benchmarks had not been prepared for engineering, so the judgements made were based primarily on the aims and intended learning outcomes (or 'objectives') presented in the self-evaluation.

There were three overall aims for the programmes covered by the subject review. These were:

- '*to provide a quality learning environment via the provision of a balanced portfolio of taught courses supported by complementary research activity*'
- '*to offer a range of professionally and vocationally orientated undergraduate and post graduate courses which seek to implement the university mission within the discipline of electrical and electronic engineering*'

- '*to offer opportunities for study to a wide range of applicants, with formal and non-standard qualifications, wishing to study state-of-the-art specialist topics within electrical, electronic, computer and broadcast engineering*'.

For the Engineering Programme, the following objectives were given. All students at BEng level should:

- '*gain a sound understanding of the essential principles of electrical and electronic engineering*'
- '*gain specialist knowledge and understanding of chosen areas of electrical and electronic engineering*'
- '*gain competence in the design process*'.

10.3.3 Comparison with similar programmes elsewhere

Combining the scores of one to four in each of the six areas of the review gives us an overall score. Calculating this for the Engineering case study programme reveals that they scored 20 out of a possible 24. Our calculations, from each of the 76 published electrical and electronic subject review reports reveals that this is the average score. Scores ranged from 15 to full marks of 24. Just over a quarter of programmes reviewed received scores of 22-24 (26 percent), of which just over a tenth scored 24 (13 per cent). The modal score was 21, which one-fifth of reports attained (19 per cent). One report, scoring 15, was not approved, as a score of one was given for one aspect of provision, and will need to be reassessed.

Table 10.2 shows a breakdown of scores received for the six broad aspects of provision reviewed, for all electrical and electronic engineering subject reviews published. As the table demonstrates, the distribution of scores received varies between the six areas covered.

We have scrutinised a number of these reports, and it is clear that in the reviews, a great importance is placed on the industrial relevance of courses. Industrial involvement in courses can also be described as widespread. In a subject overview, which describes electrical and electronic engineering higher education courses in the UK, based on subject review results, it states:

> *'Nearly all of the institutions aim to involve industrial personnel in their programmes. However, the extent and quality of this involvement varies considerably. Best practise includes the operation of well constituted advisory boards that make active contributions to curriculum developments, particularly with respect to industrial relevance. Many programmes include lectures from industrialists… Industrialists are also involved in the designing and supervising project work and placements. In a significant number of institutions, however, there is scope for improvement in the level and quality of industrial involvement.'*

Table 10.2: Scores given in electrical and electronic engineering, all published subject reviews

	Score	No.	%
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	2	3	4
	3	39	51
	4	34	45
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	2	6	8
	3	52	68
	4	18	24
Student Progression and Achievement	1	1	1
	2	7	9
	3	42	55
	4	26	34
Student Support and Guidance	2	1	1
	3	15	20
	4	60	79
Learning Resources	2	5	7
	3	25	33
	4	46	61
Quality Management and Enhancement	2	20	26
	3	35	46
	4	21	28

Source: QAA Subject Review Reports

The variability of industrial involvement in courses is addressed in the report findings. One report examined, for example, for a course which received a score of two for the curricula aspect of provision, was critical about industrial involvement:

> *'Although some staff have industrial links which facilitate updating of subject knowledge, there is not a strong base of significant consultancy and professional or industrial experience. Curricula development would benefit from direct industrial and related professional input.'*

A programme receiving a mark of four for the curricula aspect, on the other hand, was praised for the industrial input of provision:

> *'The assessors were impressed by the good working relations with industry. An industrial committee provides formal employer input to the curriculum, for each of the three major subject areas.'*

The relationship between overall scores for curricula and industrial influence is not exact, however. We have examined reports that have received scores of two, but nonetheless been praised for their policies for ensuring labour market responsiveness through industrial input. Each subject review Report examined, however, has made an assessment of the industrial input into courses.

10.4 The quality assurance process

The fieldwork has identified no deviations from the established procedures explained in Chapter 8 in relation to the subject review for the Engineering Programme.

The course provider was aware of the forthcoming review, and started preparing around a year before. The 'verification points' were defined in the self assessment exercise, and judged by the review team in relation to the six criteria set by the QAA.

Staff were 'disciplined' into collecting documentation relating to course modules, each of which was collated into module box-files. These included information on the syllabus and examples of students work.

Evidence was also supplied to the review team on the existence, functioning and involvement of Industrial Advisory Board and student consultative committee. In both cases, minutes of meetings were supplied to, and examined by, the review team.

In addition to documentation, 25 teaching sessions were observed by the review team, covering 'practically all' academic staff. Students, both past and present, and employers were also consulted by the review team and asked for their perceptions of the provision and whether it met with the claims made of it by the self-evaluation document.

10.5 Evaluation of quality assurance by the course provider

10.5.1 General perceptions and evaluation of the verification points used

One interviewee was quite cynical about the QAA subject review, arguing it does not fully capture the content of provision:

> *'I confess that I see it as a marketing exercise. I'm quite cynical … at the end of the day it just creates a number that goes into a league table. So that when people are looking 'round* [for a place to study]*, because there is so much choice, unless they've got more knowledge, they just look at league tables. It is only when you know something more about the institution, or have visited it, that you begin to realise that there is some thing more to it … organic and interesting going on.'*

Another interviewee, who had himself been a member of a review team, was more positive, saying that the subject review did include questions about the means by which they ensure relevance to industrial needs. For this, they were able to point to the Industrial Advisory Board. The interviewee also said that in the case of a review he had been involved in, where the provider

had claimed strong links to employers, the review team made contact with the employers to verify this.

The perception amongst interviewees was that the review team's judgements were made on the basis of the aims and objectives in the self-evaluation document. This is perhaps unsurprising given the lack of external reference points available at the time of the review, such as subject benchmarks. One interviewee emphasised this point, saying that the programme had been criticised for not being 'state of the art', whereas if this had not been included as an aim of the provision, they would not be judged against this measure. Clearly most, if not all engineering programmes, would claim to be industrially relevant in their self-evaluation document, however, they will not all be judged entirely equally because some will make bigger claims than others.

For the rest of section 10.5, we will examine other 'tools' by which the Engineering Programme remains responsive to the needs of industry, as identified in the field work.

10.5.2 Other tools: accreditation

According to the Institution of Electrical Engineers, at the time of the QAA review, all courses offered as part of the Engineering Programme listed in section 10.2 were accredited to Chartered Engineer level (CEng). They were accredited through the Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE). At present, four of the BEng courses remain accredited from this list: Electronic and Broadcasting Engineering, Electronic and Computer Engineering, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, and Electronic Engineering.

Although BEng courses are accredited by the IEE for CEng, they do not automatically bestow CEng status on graduates of these courses. As the *IEE Directory of Accredited Courses* explains, Engineers can use the CEng label when they have completed '*an accredited MEng degree or an accredited BEng (Hons) and a matching section meet*[ing] *the IEE's educational requirement*'. A 'matching section' is a 'learning equivalent' to one year of further study after graduation in the form of either work-based learning, part-time post graduate courses, or distance tuition. The BEng courses that are accredited at Institution 1, therefore, do not fully bestow graduates CEng status, but are designed to take them in this direction.

To get an understanding of the degree to which accreditation ensures labour market relevance of engineering degrees, it is worth looking at the context of accreditation for this industry.

The current accreditation system for engineering stems from the SARTOR report of 1997 (or 'Standards and Routes to Registration'). In this report it was announced that, in order for engineering higher education to produce the kinds of engineers

required by industry, a clear distinction should be made between two types of accredited engineers. The first type, Chartered Engineers (CEng), were required in a relatively small number. Chartered engineers were:

> *'Concerned primarily with the progress of technology through innovation, creativity and change. They develop new technologies, promote advanced designs and methods, introduce new and more efficient production techniques ... and pioneer new engineering services and management methods.'*

One interviewee put it more simply: '*It said we need a small group of people who can work across disciplines, who are very bright, and are about changing the processes of engineering*'.

The other type of accredited engineer, the Incorporated Engineer (who adopts the label IEng), in contrast, is what one interviewee described as a *'doer … they won't change the processes of engineering, they will exercise the processes of engineering'*. The report indicated that these individuals, who might for example work as production or manufacturing engineers, were required in abundance.

Because of the different requirements of the Chartered and Incorporated engineers, the content of CEng courses has to differ from IEng courses. For example, the IEE state that CEng courses focus on '*the application of scientific and engineering principles to the solution of practical problems of engineering systems and processes ...* [and an] *emphasis on the relevance of theory and analysis.'* As one interviewee at the Engineering Programme confirmed, obtaining CEng accreditation '*pulls you toward more analytical and mathematical orientation*', which would be required of these high-level engineers.

The IEE gives subject providers information on what they are looking for in order to make a course accreditation. For example, as overriding expectations, accredited courses are expected to, amongst other things:

- motivate students towards the practise of engineering, and stimulate their learning
- be taught in the context of design, so that design provides an integrating theme that exposes students to a blend of analysis and synthesis
- present an intellectual challenge, integrating theory with current industrial practise in the context of real engineering applications
- provide an awareness of the environmental, social, legal, economic and regulatory contexts in which engineers operate.

More detailed explanations of what they are looking for are also given, although the IEE try not to be too prescriptive so as to allow differences between subject providers: '*The curricula are not,*

of course, supposed to produce graduates capable of practising in every branch of engineering'. For example, the IEE makes clear that suitable topics for CEng accredited courses include, amongst other things, semiconductors, computer-aided design, and electro-optics.

Importantly, the IEE accreditation also places importance on industrial input in provision. For example, the IEE guidelines state that:

> *'The IEE believes that early contact with the real world of engineering is essential and hence would like to see an input from industry in the design, revision and assessment of EA* [or engineering applications].*'*

The importance of industry involvement is further demonstrated on the accreditation form that is filled in by the subject provider, which instructs that they must:

> *'Give details of the industrial inputs to the course review and development process, the industrial review committee, the visiting lecturers,* [and] *the names and status of members of staff responsible for arranging industrial training.'*

Note the assumption in the above *that there will be* an advisory group of industrialists, such as the Industrial Advisory Board, at the Engineering Programme. One interviewee from the Engineering Programme, himself an accreditation reviewer, revealed that in effect, a programme has to have an industrial advisory group in order to obtain accreditation. Furthermore, one of the criteria to be assessed in the accreditor's form is 'industrial input and influence'. In this way, the accreditation process attempts to ensure that provision is responsive to the needs of industry, through the insistence on such advisory boards.

The accreditation process is shorter than the QAA review. Typically, the review lasts one day, between about 9am and 4pm, with the accreditation panel meeting senior staff the night before for an hour or so, to confirm the timetable for the following day. By the end of the day, students and staff will be met, the judgements made against the criteria of the review, and the provider informed of whether or not they have been accredited for five, three or two years (depending on the overall scores given). A lot of documentation is reviewed before the day however, for example, detailed information about the curricula and its aims, and minutes from meetings of the industrial liaison group.

Labour market responsiveness of engineering accreditation

As one interviewee made clear, in a sense, the accreditation process is a stronger tool for ensuring labour market responsiveness of provision than is the QAA subject review. The

course accreditation process lays down strict requirements for industrial input into provision, unlike the QAA subject review.

One interviewee did, however, express some concerns about the degree to which the accreditation process ensured labour market relevance of engineering courses. In order to ensure the quality of CEng qualifications, the IEE states that 80 per cent of entrants must have obtained 18 points at 'A' level, compared with only ten points for IEng courses. This means that CEng accredited courses are perceived as being better than IEng courses, which encourages universities to opt for the former. He explains that a lot of the students, especially those from abroad, who make up a large number of those in engineering, have limited knowledge of engineering educational provision, and so opt for courses accredited with the 'higher' measure, CEng.

This means that a lot of universities, in an attempt to attract students, are opting for CEng status for their engineering degrees. In many cases, providers are struggling to attain CEng status, especially ex-polytechnics. However, 'the IEng is far more industrially relevant, and more tuned to the SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) environment in which we operate'. He goes on:

> *'What the engineering market really needs is what was said in the* [SARTOR] *report: you need a few of these very bright people who can talk across disciplines, and a lot of people who are innovative bright people, but they operate at that lower level.'*

What the accreditation process has actually done, according to this interviewee, is create a lot of Chartered Engineers and relatively few Incorporated Engineers, the reverse of what the SARTOR report said was needed. Furthermore, he says that the kinds of students they enrol struggle with the high level of mathematics and analysis required of CEng study, but '*if we lost it (CEng accreditation) we would loose a lot of overseas students*'. There are, it therefore appears, conflicts between the needs of industry on the one hand, and the needs of universities in attracting students on the other. In a more general remark about tools of labour market responsiveness, the interviewee said:

> *'The positive way* [in which we remain industrially relevant] *is through lecturers' involvement with people in industry. The negative way is accreditation … which is driving us to a kind of academic elitism.'*

Employer interest in engineering accreditation

There are also doubts raised about whether employers, in contrast to students, are concerned with whether courses are accredited when taking on engineering graduates. During our fieldwork, we were shown a piece of research, undertaken by an engineering academic, who sought views from colleagues in other institutions on the importance of accreditation to the employment prospects of

graduates. We would stress that the work was not undertaken by staff in the case study institutions we are reporting on, and also that as it was a small Internet-based study, we do not know how representative it was. However, it was considered to be interesting reading by an engineering course leader in one of our case study institutions, and we believe it may offer some useful perspectives to this discussion.

The engineering academics believed that holding an accredited degree would be the 'quickest possible route' to meeting the 'exemplifying entry standards' required for achieving either Incorporated or Chartered Engineer status. However, the respondents believed that possession of a non-accredited undergraduate degree does not bar an individual from embarking on routes to Chartered or Incorporated Engineer status. One respondent believed that possession of an accredited degree was useful, if only to avoid the amount of additional bureaucracy graduates would need to go through otherwise, once in their employment, if they decided they wanted to become Incorporated or Chartered.

As regards impact on graduate career destinations, and in particular upon immediate employment prospects, the academics believed that for many employers, the issue was not whether or not a particular course was accredited, but rather the actual course and institution itself. It was acknowledged that many companies have preferences (*eg* for course x, or institution y), but some of these preferences do include non-accredited courses. Views were fairly mixed, however, with an engineering tutor from one institution reporting that:

> *'Most of the industry doesn't care* [whether courses are accredited or not] *but some* [sectors] *do, for example the power industry, and consultancies. It* [desire for accreditation] *is mostly to do with course marketing and elitism. It is particularly important for overseas recruitment of students to courses.'*

Another respondent, a department head, underlined that the issue of accreditation should not be confused with one of overall quality or employability:

> *'I would match our top graduates* [for a non-accredited course] *against those from any other university, and you only have to look at the national and international awards that we regularly obtain to demonstrate that.'*

The paper gave very limited reporting of employers views, but did quote from a software engineer for a systems engineering company who stated that *'my company would not insist upon degrees being accredited.'*

However, the paper reports that on balance, and all other things being equal, the prospects for those holding accredited degrees (to

obtain a desired job in the field) are probably somewhat better than those holding non-accredited degrees.

10.5.3 Other tools: industry liaison or advisory groups

As we saw in the last section (10.5.2), some engineering courses may attempt to be responsive to industry needs through the formation of boards or committees comprised of industrialists. This is the case for the Engineering Programme, which has an Industrial Advisory Board (IAB). Such boards or committees may act in an advisory fashion, on issues such as course content and delivery, and how provision can be made more relevant to employer needs.

Originally there were two engineering schools, one for mechanical engineering and one for electrical engineering, each with a separate IAB. When both schools merged into a single engineering school, the IABs also merged into one body. The influence for setting up the IAB on the electrical side came when the school decided to move to a project-based system of teaching, learning and assessment. As one interviewee explained:

> *'Students were turning a handle and not learning very much from (traditional) classical experimentation. What we found since was that the projects gave them a much higher degree of motivation. I think the students felt the work was more relevant to the kinds of things they would be doing outside … project based work was supposed to be closer to how engineering companies work.'*

Given that this was an attempt to not only motivate students, but to make learning more akin to how companies operate, industrialists were sought out to help with the planning. These industrialists later went on to become members of the IAB. In addition, a scheme which sponsored secondments of industrialists to higher education had an impact on membership:

> *'There was an initiative about six years ago, where they sponsored industrialists to be visiting professors, professors of design. The people who went on to run the IAB came in through that scheme that added an injection of industrialists and once the money stopped – it was a three year programme – we continued with it because we thought it was very valuable.'*

The IAB today has around a dozen members, each of which is a senior engineer (perhaps in a managerial post) from a company in the local or surrounding area. The chairman works for a successful company involved in design and development for automotive engine manufacturers. Membership of the board, which is based on invitation from the school, is supposed to represent the broad range of companies in the area — electrical or mechanical, design or manufacture. There is also space for non-engineering companies who employ engineers. For example, one member represents a pharmaceutical company which employs 50 engineers. The composition of the board is also broadly intended

to reflect the types of course provision offered; as one interviewee said, '*we have to get some more* [members] *from the design side now, as design is growing in importance in our courses*.'

Interviewees were keen to emphasise that the IAB works in an advisory capacity — they cannot force decisions upon the department. As one interviewee stated: '*we basically have an IAB because we want to (not because we have to). And they are an advisory group, so we use them as much as we can.*' In this way, they may be consulted when courses are being validated or revalidated; on how courses are delivered; on the content of the curricula itself; or how students are progressing. The IAB meet once every term (*ie* three times a year), however members may be contacted between meetings, and extra meetings may occur between senior board members and academic staff.

As well as being reactive to requests for industrial perspectives on various matters, the IAB can promote changes to course provision that they think will be useful for industry. One interviewee explained that the introduction of portfolio working for students, whereby students amass a collection of work they can show prospective employers, was as a direct result of IAB recommendations. As one interviewee explained:

> *'The IAB take on various projects and they have had for a while a project to get us to do portfolio work … so we have begun to get students to create portfolios in their first year … the concept is that they can walk away from this place with a transcript which gives the official results, but they can carry with them documentation of all the practical things they did. That would hopefully make them more employable.'*

As a result, the employer benefits, as they are better able to see the student's capabilities, as does the student, who can better sell him or herself. The importance of portfolios is represented in the minutes of one IAB meeting we have obtained:

> *'The need for students to keep portfolios was discussed. Year 1 electrical engineering students are required to keep portfolios ...* [but] *The IAB would like the development of the portfolio to be implemented in the school* [as a whole] *as it considers it good working practise and if necessary would supply a motivation in the form of a £50 prize for the best portfolio.'*

The board members also have a role in trying to get students to think about the wider applications and implications of their work in a commercial setting. The IAB has, for example, been instrumental in the creation and operation of an inter-semester design week, in which students were asked to design an item with a practical commercial application, and produce a poster. Members of the IAB then ask students about their designs and a prize is given for the best.

In a similar manner, at the end of their final year, students produce project work which has a practical and commercial application. Students then display their project work for IAB members who, over the course of three hours, visit each student's work and ask them questions about it. This occurred when we attended a, IAB meeting as part of our field work. We observed members asking students questions, predominately around the practical and commercial applications of what they had designed and/or built. For example, one member of the IAB asked a student how much they thought it would cost to put their design into production, another student was asked if they were aware of the safety laws relevant to producing their design.

As one member of the IAB said in the meeting that followed:

> *'We can assume that they know how it* [the student's design] *works. If they don't it will soon become obvious when talking to them. What we are more interested in is how well they can explain the project, as they would have to with a proto-type in a company.'*

In the meeting that followed, IAB members gave their overall observations on the quality of the work, and suggestions for how students could be better prepared for presenting their work in public. Portfolio working, inter-semester design week, and the displaying of final year students works are all concerned with producing future employees who have the ability to explain and sell their ideas, as they would have to in industry.

As well as meeting students at the end of project work, the IAB has become involved in teaching. During a meeting of the IAB we attended, it was decided that students would benefit from having selected engineering lectures delivered by industrialists. This, it was felt, would lead to students to attaining a better understanding of the practical applications of what they were learning. Seven IAB members committed themselves to taking a lecture, and are to be sent a list of possible lectures to choose from that would be of relevance to their area. Once again, it was felt that direct contact between industry and students would have a beneficial effect on producing suitable engineers for the market.

On a final point, the IAB, and groups in similar engineering departments across the country, act indirectly as systems of accountability. Whilst the IAB does not have the power to enforce it's opinions, during meetings of the IAB, academic staff have to justify their actions to respected engineers. They provide information on the organisation and content of the syllabus — including descriptions of modules — information on student numbers and expenditure, and have to justify the progression of students. In this way, this monitoring activity has the effect of making sure that the school is meeting some standards in the engineers it produces. IAB members are not paid for their time, but they may feel it is a way of 'putting something back', as one

expressed to us, whilst making sure that engineers leave university as potential recruits.

10.5.4 Other tools: research

A further manner in which course provision is kept relevant to industry needs is through research that is conducted by the academic staff, which brings them into contact with employers and the issues they face. Staff from the Engineering Programme do a fair amount of consultancy work for industry. One interviewee explains:

> *'When you get lecturers involved with industry it influences what they do. For example, I've just finished some consultancy and I've learned such an awful lot from doing that exercise.'*

Academics will get a chance to see the problems and issues that employers face, and this can be addressed in the teaching and learning.

10.6 Evaluation by field of work

The Engineering Programme is the only case study where we were given access to employers, via our visits to the Industrial Advisory Board meetings. (The Engineering Programme was the only programme reviewed with an Industrial Advisory Board, also making access easier). During the student displays of work we visited, we were able to question a number of the IAB members about their involvement in the board, their reasons for participating, and their opinions about the relevance of provision to the market.

Those questioned said that they felt the Industrial Advisory Board was a useful mechanism for influencing the content of engineering courses. They also indicated that it had led to real changes to the curricula — for example the move toward portfolio working, which as employers, they liked because it allowed graduates to display their work and ideas at interview. In addition, members interviewed were supportive of the curricula content. Where there was most concern expressed in the meetings attended was in regard to how well students expressed themselves and 'sold' their ideas when questioned about their project work. Verbal communication, it was felt, was important for graduates entering the world of work — presenting ideas to clients *etc* — and it was suggested that this was an area in which changes could be made.

10.7 Monitoring of quality assurance with regard to labour market relevance

A complex arrangement of committees, at institution, faculty and school level, oversee the quality assurance of the Librarianship

programme. However, it is through the validation, or revalidation process, that the content of courses is systematically reviewed, placing at least some emphasis on the changing shape of industry and, as a result, its needs.

Revalidation of courses happen every five years. The Faculty Academic Board (FAB) set up a validation panel, which includes FAB members, a member of staff from another department, external examiners, and an external expert — either an employer or an academic in the field.

The process for introducing new engineering degrees is as follows. First, the course team put together a course proposal which gives an outline and justification for the course. The proposals are then explained to a Programme Board, comprised of the whole school and representatives from central services (*eg* computing, libraries *etc*). Once agreement has been reached from the Programme Board (and appropriate changes made), it moves to the Faculty Academic Board for final approval. After this, a detailed curriculum is put together, '*fleshing out the substance of the course*', and is agreed by the course team, Programme Board, and Faculty Academic Board. After this, it goes through a validation exercise, in which the documentation is presented to the validation panel for approval.

Evidence provided to justify the introduction of a new course focuses most heavily on whether there is demand for the course amongst students, although student demand may also reflect the way in which industry is changing.

To give an example, the school introduced a degree programme combining conservation with engineering, following the observation that there were a growing number of hi-tech conservation sites requiring engineers with an understanding of conservation issues. In the event, there was not much demand on the part of students for the course, and it may close, but this is an example of the school attempting to adapt to what it sees as industrial needs through the validation process.

The validation process clearly presents periodic opportunities to assess the industrial currency of provision, although the perhaps ambiguous involvement of engineering practitioners — who may or may not be involved — needs to be noted.

11. Librarianship Programme

11.1 Institution

The Librarianship Programme is that provided by Institution 1, a description of which is given in Chapter 9.

11.2 Description of programme

Librarianship Programme, for the purposes of this research refers to Information and Library Studies BA (Hons) provided in Institution 1. The programme was reviewed in 2001, with a BA (Hons) in Information and Media Studies, and two information-based Masters programmes. Amongst the two undergraduate degrees there were around 250 students, around 25 of them part time. Overall, there were an equivalent (when taking into consideration part-time and hourly-paid staff) of 14.5 full-time members of academic staff. There are six members of academic staff working solely on the Librarianship side.

At present there are 50 undergraduates on the Librarianship Programme. Despite being separate and distinct courses, there is some overlap in teaching and learning between the Librarianship Programme and Information and Media Studies degree. Students have to complete 12 modules a year over the three year teaching period, totalling 36 in all. There are approximately 30 modules exclusive to the Librarianship Programme, not all of which are compulsory, so at the very least, six modules from the sister degree course must be done.

Students are able to select the courses they want to pursue, subject to the approval of tutors, who advise them of the overall coherence of their choices.

At the time of the review, the majority of entrants for the Librarianship Programme were female, and mature (aged over 25).

11.3 The quality of the programme

11.3.1 Results from the subject review

Table 11.1 gives the scores awarded for the six aspects of provision covered in the review. As the table shows, in all cases, the aims and objectives set out in the self-evaluation were met, or substantially met, with the awarding of scores of three or four. For two aspects of provision, scores of three were awarded, indicating that there is 'scope for improvement', and for the rest, maximum scores of four were given.

Under 'curriculum design, content and organisation', which scored a maximum score of four, the report noted that the provision meets the aims of ensuring graduates have the requisite skills to gain employment in their chosen sector. The programme is accredited by the Institute of Information Scientists and the Library Association. Courses are modular in structure, and staff described as having considerable expertise.

The subject review also reported, in relation to the curricula aspect of the review, that:

> *'Work placements are an essential part* [of the provision] *… and provide opportunities for students to relate theory and practice. Undergraduates may not graduate with an honours degree unless they have completed a work placement successfully.'*

The report also noted the high level of employer input into the provision:

> *'All programmes are commended by employers and external examiners. The division seeks the advise and input from employers into the curriculum in a number of ways. Feedback is sought from employers*

Table 11.1: Scores received in the QAA subject review for the Librarianship programme

Aspect of provision	Score
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	4
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	3
Student Progression and Achievement	3
Student Support and Guidance	4
Learning Resources	4
Quality Management and Enhancement	4

Note: **A score of 4**: 'This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.'
A score of 3: 'This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.'
A score of 2: 'This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.'
A score of 1: 'The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.'

Source: QAA Subject Reviews

taking students on work experience. In addition, the division makes extensive use of visiting lecturers with professional experience who deliver either guest lectures, or may be responsible for the delivery of a module in conjunction with a member of staff in the division, and is valued by students and employers as a means of ensuring the currency and relevance of the curriculum.'

In relation to 'teaching learning and assessment' the Librarianship Programme received a score of three. During the first year, it is reported that students obtain a skills and knowledge base, '*while at advanced levels, a combination of research, analysis and essential presentation skills relevant to the professional needs of information and media industries are developed*'. Teaching, which draws on staff research and scholarship, was described positively. Assessment methods were varied according to the module being studied. Theoretical modules were assessed through essays, presentations and exams, whilst more practical modules deployed production work, portfolios of practical work, and Internet publication. On a more negative note, and accounting for the failure to obtain full marks, it was noted that there was inadequate feedback on work to students in some cases.

Under 'student progression and achievement' the report firstly gives an overview into the student profile of the programme, and then moves on to discuss the achievement rate of students. It noted the high level of withdrawal in the Librarianship Programme, and the attempts by staff to reduce this. Because of the high student withdrawal rate, the programme was awarded a score of three, rather than four, in this area.

On a more positive note, it reports that:

'Employers commented favourably on the quality of graduates, in particular their independence and confidence, and their IT, managerial, technical and presentation skills … Evidence of student achievement, and comments from employers indicate that graduates from the courses are well prepared for employment, and professional accrediting bodies are supportive.'

In relation to 'student support and guidance' it was recorded that course documentation is well produced, and students are allocated a personal tutor, whom they meet at least once per semester. It is recommended that the system becomes more formalised, however, so that students with difficulties are identified early. In addition, students have a personal tutor during their placement, and receive a wide range of welfare services and careers guidance.

'Learning resources' focuses on the library, IT and teaching facilities, which are deemed completely suitable for the programme. Consequently, a mark of four is awarded for this area.

Under 'quality management and enhancement', the series of QA bodies at university, faculty, and school are judged to work

effectively, and operate in a 'robust' fashion. It was noted that the five-yearly revalidation programme is also 'robust', rigorous, and includes external representatives. Similarly, the programme is subject to accreditation reviews every five years. An annual report, detailing the 'health' of the programme, is also produced by the course team. Student input is also gained through module questionnaires, and the opportunity to attend 'course boards' held each semester. Finally, staff development policies are described as working well.

11.3.2 Verification points used

The aspects of provision for which scores are awarded were set by the QAA, and were identical for each subject review. The six aspects are explained in their entirety in section 8.2.4. Judgements about provision, which result in the scores being given for each aspect, will, in theory, be based primarily on the aims and learning objectives set out in the self-evaluation document, and the suggestions about curricula content and student achievements given in the subject benchmark statements. At the time of the Librarianship Programme subject review, however, subject benchmarks had not been prepared for this area of study, so the judgements made were based primarily on the aims and objectives of the self-evaluation.

There were five overall aims for the courses covered by the subject review. In addition, there were 15 learning outcome objectives, plus five specifically for the Librarianship Programme. The most important aims, with respect to labour market relevance, are arguably as follows:

- '*to provide coherent, applicable courses that are accessible to, and meet the intellectual and vocational needs of, students from a variety of backgrounds*'
- '*to meet the needs of the wider community by producing graduates: who are able to apply their skills and knowledge in a professional and effective manner; who are well prepared for employment in today's world; well equipped to become independent life-long learners*.'

Three out of the five learning outcome objectives, which are arguably most relevant to this research, are that graduates will be able to demonstrate:

- '*theoretical and practical knowledge and skills in managing information, and in managing information services, including libraries*'
- '*a theoretical and practical understanding of information organisation, retrieval and presentation*'
- '*the ability to contribute as an information and library professional to the development of socially-useful information systems*.'

11.3.3 Comparison with similar programmes elsewhere

Combining the scores of one to four for the six aspects of provision assessed in the subject review allows us to arrive at an overall score. For the Librarianship Programme case study the score was 22, which was slightly above the average of 21 for reviews including librarianship. However, only eight reviews have been conducted and placed on the QAA website. Scores ranged from 18 to 24. Table 11.2 gives a breakdown of the scores for each of the six overall areas reviewed.

Because of the small number of subject review reports, we have been able to examine all the reports. The examination has revealed that all of the programmes are accredited, at least for the most relevant courses. Furthermore, each report assesses the industrial relevance of the curricula, and the methods by which the courses remain contemporary. In all the review reports, links with employers were praised, and in four of the eight reports it was stated that there were industrial advisory panels composed of employers from the field. In other cases' subject review reports, provision was said to be influenced by informal but effective links with organisations and companies, research, and consultancy. In all cases, programmes were accredited by the then professional bodies of Librarianship and Information Management.

Table 11.2: Scores given in Librarianship and information management, all published subject reviews

	Score	No.	%
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	3	2	25
	4	6	75
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	3	6	75
	4	2	25
Student Progression and Achievement	2	2	25
	3	2	25
	4	4	50
Student Support and Guidance	3	1	12.5
	4	7	87.5
Learning Resources	3	1	12.5
	4	7	87.5
Quality Management and Enhancement	2	1	12.5
	3	3	37.5
	4	4	50

Source: QAA Subject Review Reports

11.4 The quality assurance process

The system by which the QAA subject review is carried out is explained in Chapter 8. From the information gathered from interviews, it is apparent that the review of the Librarianship Programme broadly followed this structure.

The verification points, essentially what the programme was being judged against were defined by the programme itself in the self-evaluation document, based on the six aspects of provision specified by the QAA. At the time of the review, there were no subject benchmarks for Librarianship to act as external reference points, so the review was 'led' primarily by the aims and intended learning outcomes in the self-evaluation document.

The documentation supplied to the review team was extensive. Each course module had two large folders of documentation. According to one interviewee, the folders contained:

- the syllabus
- a module evaluation written by the member of staff running the programme
- a module evaluation from questionnaires returned by students
- the timetable for the modules
- the marks awarded to students
- the marking scheme
- copies of examination scripts completed by students
- a selection of course work
- handouts given in the modules
- examples of students' work.

Student work shown was chosen by the course provider to reflect differing levels of achievement — 'good, bad, middling' — and came with the member of staff's comments on. Whilst the system of organising documentation in this fashion worked quite well — it was an approach copied from the maths department — some staff members did not assemble as much documentation as others, and the review team did pick up on this.

In addition to inspecting the documentation, staff were asked questions at meetings about the course, and teaching was observed — 15 sessions in all, covering most, if not all staff.

11.5 Evaluation of quality assurance by the course provider

11.5.1 General perceptions

Interviewees expressed the opinion that the QAA review was more focused on the policies in place to ensure quality assurance, and the manner in which provision was delivered, than the currency of provision in regard to labour market needs. As one interviewee stated:

> *'They certainly did concern themselves to some extent with the currency of the material being taught, and they were judging that both from our course documentation and from their observations. But I think because only one of their six criteria is concerned with curriculum … one got the impression that it was more aspects of the process, delivery, quality control, that loomed rather larger in their eyes and in ours ... So in that sense, preparing for the exercise, painful though that was, was enormously valuable. It undoubtedly sharpened* [our quality assurance policies and procedures].'

Another interviewee agreed, adding that the course accreditation exercise on the part of the relevant professional bodies was more concerned with labour market relevance. As she explained:

> *'It was very much on the delivery of what we said we did. The bits which were about the effectiveness of it* [for labour market relevance] *were the questions we were asked about the jobs our students got, and so we prepared lists of career destinations of students. But it is the accreditation process which is more about whether what we are teaching is what industry wants.'*

This interviewee went on to explain that, whereas the QAA took the content of the curriculum at face value, and tried to assess whether they did what they said they did, and delivered in terms of student progression the accreditation exercise, to some degree prescribes the areas to be covered.

11.5.2 Evaluation of the verification points used

Interviewees indicated that questions asked in forming judgements focused on what was said in the self-evaluation document, alongside more general questioning.

> *'It was led by the self-evaluation, and we were aware of this because those are the rules ... Having said that though, there were times when I felt that there was a certain agenda which was not necessarily co-terminus with what we had written … a sense that they had an idea of what the standards should be, and they were testing to see if we conformed with them in all respects. I didn't feel all of the time they were constrained by our self-evaluation.'*

There was a perception amongst interviewees that the extent to which the QAA review questioned the content of the provision

was restricted because subject benchmark statements, setting out the parameters of librarianship courses, had not at that time been published. Had they been published at the time of the review, they would have been used as external measures of what such programmes can, and should, include.

Of course, the relevance of the course to the labour market was discussed and evaluated because measures to ensure labour market relevance were included in the self-evaluation document. During meetings with the QAA panel there were discussions regarding the professional involvement of staff with organisations and employers, the industrial placements of students, and the research and consultancy work of academics.

Overall, however, interviewees felt that the QAA subject review, with its distinction of the six areas to be assessed, was not intended to focus heavily on the labour market relevance of provision (this, it was felt, was more the task of the accreditation panel, which examines, and to some degree specifies, the content of courses). Consequently, the six aspects covered, and the verification points used for each aspect, do not make immediately explicit the currency of provision, although information on this will be included in the finished report.

For the rest of section 11.5, we will examine other 'tools' by which the Librarianship Programme remains responsive to the needs of industry, as identified in the field work.

11.5.3 Other tools: accreditation

As already indicated, professional-body accreditation of the Librarianship Programme was considered by interviewees to be one of the most important tools by which the currency and labour market relevance of courses is ensured.

Obtaining accreditation is regarded as extremely important to librarianship degree programmes. In order to practise as a Chartered Librarian, it is essential that you have graduated with a degree accredited by the relevant professional bodies. Chartered Librarian status is the generally recognised norm for the profession, so if a course was to lose its accreditation, students would stop applying and the course would run into difficulties.

At the time of the QAA review, accreditation would be jointly awarded by the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists.[1] Courses are accredited for five years in most cases, although accreditation may be given for a shorter period if there are concerns about the provision. An accreditation visit generally lasting about one day takes place, at which a panel

[1] The two bodies have since merged to form the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

will ask senior staff questions about provision, based on documentation previously supplied.

Accreditation depends on the ability of the provider to justify that their course covers required subject areas, from a 'content checklist'. There are five overall areas, each broken down into smaller subject units. For example, under 'information generation Communication and Utilisation', the following areas need to be covered by the curriculum:

- principles of information science
- identification and analysis of information flows and sources
- principles of collection and data management
- knowledge organisation and information retrieval
- information evaluation
- data restructuring and presentation.

Despite the general specification of areas to be covered, one interviewee said he thought that the accreditation requirements were not too prescriptive:

> *'There is a checklist of the subject areas that they would expect to see represented, but there is a good deal of flexibility in the proportions of time allocated to the parts of that checklist.'*

He adds that it is important that there is some variability between the content of courses:

> *'Because it is a pretty broad field, it wouldn't do if they were overly prescriptive.'*

The course content requirements are drawn up be an accreditation panel, comprised of around ten '*luminaries from academia and practising institutions, libraries and information centres, in the public and private sectors*'. Because of the composition of the panel, the course requirements are felt by the interviewees to be reflective of the needs of employers.

11.5.4 Other tools: industrial placements

As already stated, in order to graduate with a degree in the Librarianship Programme at Institution 1, the student must complete an industrial placement. This may influence the course provision in three major ways. Firstly, students on placement must be visited at least once, and during the course of the visit, staff often cultivate relationships with employers. Individuals from these employers may be asked to do a lecture on their particular field of work (see section 11.5.6). Secondly, the placement gives the students practical experience of using the theoretical knowledge learnt during the degree.

The third and final potential way in which industrial placements influence provision is through feedback from students on the types of work that were done on placement. To give one example, students reported that during placements, they were working with databases a lot, and using the World Wide Web. As a result, a module, 'Information Services for the Web,' has been created, '*which includes elements of HTML and data bases, with a web slant, which is much more relevant to things people are being asked to do when they get to work*'.

11.5.5 Other tools: research and consultancy work

Interviewees stated that research and consultancy work by academic staff influenced the content of course provision. One interviewee said she had performed information audits of health organisations and local authorities, thus acquiring some understanding of their needs. Other members of staff have completed research on how library collections are used in universities, and how visual information is stored, which both have practical applications.

Interestingly, however, one interviewee thought that there was a conflict between the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which assesses the level of research conducted by university departments, and the QAA subject review. As the interviewee explains:

> *'It is an interesting point that, if you are talking about labour market relevance, it is quite difficult to recruit staff now with an industry background, because you have opposing forces at play. If you want to raise your RAE score, you want research-active staff. Research-active staff do not normally come from industry. If you want to keep your courses relevant, you need staff with industrial experience. It would be unlikely I would get my job now, because I came from a public library background, and had no research experience.'*

11.5.6 Informal links with employers, and professional experience

The Librarianship Programme does not have an industrial advisory board at present, although they are in the process of putting one together. However, the interviewees say they have strong but informal links with industry already, and the introduction of a committee is planned to formalise relationships.

Links with employees have been cultivated by the staff over the years in a number of ways. As already discussed, one way in which staff forge links with employers is through the industrial placements that students must go on as part of their degree programme. As an interviewee explains, '*because students have to do a placement, we are able to build, and form relationships, with a considerable number of institutions*'. Alternatively, contacts may have been made with individuals staff have known from previous

library jobs, or from consultancy or research work done with or for practitioners, organisations, or professional bodies.

As already stated, the Librarianship Programme organises one-off lectures from practitioners working in a particular area of Librarianship or information management, who talk about an aspect of their work. To give an example, a practising archivist recently did a lecture on the digitisation of information in local studies collections, for a module on local collections. They have lists of people who they can call on to give lectures on a wide range of topics.

Industrial contacts may also influence provision by giving informal feedback to staff on the content of modules. As one interviewee explained:

> *'If I was writing a new module, or something new, or something I hadn't taught before, then I might well ring up somebody working in that field and say 'I'm thinking of doing these things, is there anything else?' When I first came here I started to teach records management. Having not done a great deal* [in this area] *in my previous job, I did, on that occasion, phone up some people I knew to be more experienced and say 'I'm trying to work out a new syllabus for this module, these are the things I've got, what else do you think I should be doing?'*

It is also worth noting that four of the six members of staff working on the Librarianship Programme, come from practitioner (rather than academic) backgrounds.

11.6 Evaluation by field of work

Unfortunately, stringent data protection laws in the UK, as well as a desire on the part of universities to not burden employers with which they have links, has meant that we have not had much contact with employers for the four case studies. The Engineering Programme was the only one of four reviewed for which we had access to employers, via their Industrial Advisory Board. However, the perspectives of employers of librarians has been obtained through the employer survey, the findings of which comprise Part 3.

11.7 Monitoring of quality assurance with regard to labour market relevance

A complex arrangement of committees, at institution, faculty and school level, oversee the quality assurance of the Librarianship programme. However, it is in through the validation, or revalidation, process that the content of courses is systematically reviewed, placing some emphasis on the needs of industry.

Revalidation of courses happen every five years. The Faculty Academic Board (FAB) sets up a validation panel, which includes

FAB members, a member of staff from another department, external examiners, and an external expert; either someone working in the field, or an academic.

Senior members of staff produce a document justifying the content of the curriculum, and making a case for changes. The document should include evidence for the points made, including information and data on the labour market. As one interviewee explains, '*you need to bring evidence from the market in the form of market research, or perceptions of employers. We might use a survey* [of employers] *... or official publications and statistics, which one might draw on'*. So, for example, data on the sorts of information management jobs library graduates go into could influence changes to the content of the course.

12. Institution 2

12.1 Description of institution

Institution 2 came into existence as a polytechnic in the early 1970s, bringing together three separate educational providers. It has continued to grow with the absorption of other institutions over the years, and currently has 18,500 students, making it similar in size to Institution 1. Institution 2 was granted university status in 1992.

The university is organised into five faculties, all but one of which, Humanities and Social Sciences, is predominately concerned with professional or vocational education. Within each faculty is a number of 'divisions'. The 'Leisure and Tourism Industries' division and the 'Marketing' division, which concern us here, are both part of the wider 'Business School' faculty.

Because of the emphasis on vocational education, the university, in its mission statement, claims:

> *'We maintain close links with industry and the professions in our areas of expertise, through our ability to deliver quality services and innovate in selected academic and professional fields.'*

The student composition is fairly unusual for a higher education institution. At the time of the review, only one-third of undergraduate students had entered with traditional qualifications (*eg* 'A' levels). Students also tend to be older: over half of new entrants (57 per cent) were over 25. In addition, around half came from minority ethic communities in the local and neighbouring areas.

13. Hospitality Programme

13.1 Institution

The Hospitality Programme is that provided by Institution 2, a description of which is given in Chapter 12.

13.2 Description of programme

The review, which was completed in November 2001, covered Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation and Sport. We have focused on courses exclusively in the Leisure and Tourism Industries division. The review report lists these as:

BA (Hons) Hotel Management

BA (Hons) International Tourism and Hotel Management

BA (Hons) Tourism Management.

From September 2001, however, the structure of courses has changed. Whereas previously students enrolled on any of the above three distinct courses, now students are enrolled onto one degree programme: 'Tourism and Hospitality Management'. They will complete a common first year of studies, after which they will be able to pursue units which allow them to graduate with different degrees. As a result, the following permutations will be possible:

BA (Hons) Tourism and Hospitality Management

BA (Hons) Tourism Management

BA (Hons) International Tourism Management

BA (Hons) Tourism Development

BA (Hons) International Tourism Development

BA (Hons) Hospitality Management

BA (Hons) International Hospitality Management

BA (Hons) Hospitality & Tourism Management

BA (Hons) International Tourism & Hospitality Management.

Given that this change is too recent to have yielded students graduating with the above degree titles, the subject review focuses on the three original courses, whilst making references to the changes as well.

For the purposes of the research, therefore, 'the Hospitality Programme' refers to all the above undergraduate degree courses in Institution 2. This term is used for ease of explanation, but note that it also covers tourism.

The student profile of those on tourism and hospitality courses is marked by the large proportion from minority ethnic groups (almost half) and overseas students (45 per cent of entrants are from abroad).

13.3 The quality of the programme

13.3.1 Results of the subject review

As Table 13.1 indicates, the Hospitality Programme scored a maximum of four in four of the six areas reviewed, and the other two aspects of provision scored three, meaning that although the aims and objectives have been substantially met, there was some room for improvement.

In relation to 'curriculum design, content and organisation', the report praised the '*currency and industrial focus of the hospitality and tourism provision'*. In reaching this conclusion, they point first, to the fact that the course has recently been redesigned to take account of changes in the industries in question (for more on this see section 13.7).

Table 13.1: Scores received in the QAA subject review for the Hospitality Programme

Aspect of provision	Score
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	4
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	3
Student Progression and Achievement	4
Student Support and Guidance	4
Learning Resources	4
Quality Management and Enhancement	3

Note: **A score of 4**: 'This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.'
A score of 3: 'This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.'
A score of 2: 'This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.'
A score of 1: 'The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.'

Source: QAA Subject Reviews

Furthermore, they note that ex-students they consulted felt their studies were of relevance to their employment which, as is implied, may have been because of industrial links and research:

> *'Students indicated that they found these subjects to be relevant and valuable in their later careers. There is ample evidence that research, contacts with employers, and scholarly activities undertaken by staff inform the curricula.'*

The conclusion that the course was of industrial relevance was also based on the fact that students undertook a one year industrial placement. The report noted that '*these placements provide students with valuable insights at this stage of their academic career*'.

In addition to these observations, it was noted that the courses are coherent, and progress suitably through the educational process, although negatively, there was '*too little emphasis on developing students' abilities to analyse, synthesise and evaluate*'.

Under 'teaching, learning and assessment', it was reported that the system supported those entering from a diverse range of backgrounds. A broad range of teaching methods were used, from the more traditional use of lectures and seminars to *'practical activities, field trips and workshops to integrate theory with practise on all courses'.* The quality of the teaching was also said to be good, set at the right level for students, '*and was often informed by staff research and professional expertise*'. The promotion of independent learning, in particular through a final year project, was also noted.

More negatively, unit guides, detailing the content of courses for students, could have been more consistently structured and contain clearer information in some cases. Furthermore, evidence suggested that there was some variability between units, in terms of the volume of work and expectations of students, and in the quality of written feedback given to students. For these reasons, it was felt that there was some room for improvement, and a score of three was awarded.

In relation to 'student progression and achievement', it was noted that there are a significant number of students withdrawing at the end of the first year, although this was deemed to be the result of the large numbers entering via non-traditional ('A' level) routes. It was reported that around 60 per cent of students achieve a second class degree or above. As an indicator of the relevance of the course to industry, it was reported that around 90 per cent of graduates surveyed were in '*appropriate permanent employment*'.

On 'student support and guidance', the report stated that students from different backgrounds were supported according to their differing needs. A Learning and Development Centre (LDC) provided student support through drop-in and guidance sessions, and workshops. English classes were provided for students that

needed them, and minority ethnic students had the opportunity to be mentored by a manager from business. Students with disabilities were reported to receive a range of support, and those with learning difficulties get specialised individual support. Students in the first and second year met with a tutor at least three times a year to discuss academic and personal matters, and students on placement had a personal tutor as well. The work of the LDC included careers guidance, and some employers regularly gave talks on career opportunities in their industries. No negative points were levelled at Student Support and Guidance, and a mark of four was awarded for this area.

'Learning resources' covered lecture theatres, computer facilities, and the library resources, all of which were deemed to fully meet the aims set by the subject provider. It was noted that the business school encourages the use of IT skills applicable to business situations, and the resources deployed meet this aim.

Under 'quality management and enhancement', it was reported that the system of committees, particularly at faculty level, was well developed for ensuring the quality and improvement of provision. There were robust peer-observation programmes, and a staff development plan. Student feedback was obtained via unit evaluations and course representatives. In relation to industrial input, it was stated that:

> *'Employers views are obtained through a range of formal and informal mechanisms, and excellent contact is maintained through specific industrial collaborative programmes.'*

The system of course validation and revalidation was also described as robust, although it is noted that it has not yet solved some problems, such as a variability in the quality of unit guides and the development of staff IT skills. Otherwise, the criticism in relation to 'quality management and enhancement' related to links with the HND programmes, included in the subject review but not covered by our fieldwork.

Overall, the report was positive in relation to the industrial focus of the courses; the coherence and progression of the curricula; the learning and teaching; student progression; student support, learning resources; and the structure of the internal quality assurance system.

13.3.2 Verification points used

The aspects of provision for which scores were awarded were set by the QAA, and were identical for each subject review. The six aspects are explained in their entirety in section 8.2.4. Judgements about provision, which result in the scores being given for each aspect will, in theory, be based primarily on the aims and intentions set out in the self-evaluation document, and the suggestions about

curricula content and student achievements given in the subject benchmark statements.

Interviewees felt that subject benchmark statements may have influenced some of the questioning in the subject review. However, subject benchmark statements written for hospitality and tourism were said by interviewees to be pretty wide, and it was difficult to clearly distinguish between questions asked relating to the self-evaluation document and subject benchmark statements (see section 13.5.1).

There were five overall aims for the programmes covered by the subject review. These were to:

- '*offer curricula that reflect current issues in the sector of focus*'
- *'equip students for a range of work careers and/or future study'*
- *'employ effective and relevant teaching methods and ways of learning'*
- *'offer a supportive learning environment that addresses the needs of students from diverse backgrounds'*
- *'offer a supportive, structured opportunity for students to undertake practical work experience in their chosen field'*
- '*underpin the curricula with research, scholarly activities, consultancy and/or relevant industry/sector input*.

There were, in addition to the aims listed above, 20 learning outcome objectives set out in the self-evaluation for the degree courses covered under the Hospitality Programme. Some objectives applied to all graduates, others were specific to a certain degree course.

A selection of the more vocationally-relevant objectives are as follows: students should be able to:

- '*demonstrate a range of personal transferable skills and sector-specific skills and knowledge'*
- *'appreciate the social, economic and cultural context in which their sector operates locally, nationally and internationally'*
- *'evaluate tasks, roles and practical problems of those in management/ decision-making positions within the industry/sector'*
- '*understand the structure and operation of the hotel/hospitality industry and the trends and issues affecting the industry'* [depending on the degree course]
- '*understand the structure and operation of the tourism sector and the factors which affect its development'* [tourism degrees only].

13.3.3 Comparison with similar programmes elsewhere

Combining the scores of one to four in each of the six areas of the subject review gives us an overall score. Calculating this for the Hospitality Programme reveals that they scored 22 out of a possible 24. Our calculations, from each of the 77 published hospitality reports, reveal that this is an above average score: the mean is 20. Scores ranged from 13 to full marks of 24. Just over one-third of programmes reviewed received scores of 22-24 (35 per cent), of which just over one-fifth scored 22 (21 per cent), making it the modal score. Three programmes, those awarded scores of 13 or 14, were not approved, and will need to be reassessed one year after the publication of the relevant review report.

Table 13.2 shows a breakdown of scores received for the six broad aspects of provision reviewed, for all hospitality subject reviews published. As the table demonstrates, the distribution of scores received varies between the six areas covered. The only aspect of provision for which subject review reports were given scores of one, indicating that there would be non-approval of provision, was in the area of Quality Management and Enhancement. In this area, the majority of reports scored three, as was the case with the

Table 13.2: Scores given in hospitality, sport and leisure, all published subject reviews

	Score	No.	%
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	2	7	9
	3	28	36
	4	42	55
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	2	12	16
	3	50	65
	4	15	19
Student Progression and Achievement	2	8	10
	3	32	42
	4	37	48
Student Support and Guidance	2	1	1
	3	13	17
	4	63	82
Learning Resources	2	4	5
	3	23	30
	4	50	65
Quality Management and Enhancement	1	3	4
	2	14	18
	3	44	57
	4	16	21

Source: QAA Subject Review Reports

case study Hospitality Programme, indicating that although measures were effective, improvements could be made. This was also the case for Teaching Learning and Assessment (for which 65 per cent scored three).

Student Support and Guidance, Learning Resources, and Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation, were all aspects of provision for which the majority of subject reviews awarded full scores of four.

We have examined a range of reports, awarded a cross-section of scores. In the case of all reports examined, there were assessments of the industrial relevance of courses, and the ways in which they ensure the industrial currency of curricula. It can also be observed that those scoring two tend to get criticised in relation to labour market responsiveness to a greater degree. The following quotes are from reports that scored two:

> *'Individual staff liase with employers through developing work-based activities and industrial projects. However, there is limited evidence of employer input in the curriculum design process. Employers state they would welcome opportunities to input in to the curriculum design to ensure programmes reflect the views of changes in industry.'*

> *'The courses links with industry are not as extensive as the aims would suggest. The employers forum has met, but on each occasion only one employer has attended.'*

> *'The currency and content of degree modules is variable. Some modules validated in 1994 have remained unchanged and require revision.'*

However, industrial currency is not enough to ensure a good grade in relation to curricula, as is demonstrated from the following positive quote taken from a report awarding two for this aspect of provision:

> *'Through work experience units, staff are able to maintain a dialogue with employers which enables them to ensure that the currency of the curriculum is maintained.'*

Where this report did less well in relation to curricula was in the academic progression of the course. It is, therefore, wise to look at reports in some detail, rather than in all cases assuming that lower scores indicate weak labour market relevance.

At the other end of the spectrum, all reports examined scoring four in relation to Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation praised the industrial relevance of provision, and links with employers:

> *'There are many examples of stakeholder interest and input into curricula development. These include visits by industry figures, and consultation with industry about the nature and scope of courses.'*

'In many cases, staff research or professional experience … informs module content. This is reinforced by links, often informal, with employers and professional bodies.'

13.4 The quality assurance process

The QAA quality assurance process is explained in detail in Chapter 8. The fieldwork has identified no deviation from the procedures explained in Chapter 8. The 'verification points' were set out as aims and objectives in the self-evaluation document by the academic staff involved in the course delivery. Scores of one to four were awarded for the six aspects of provision reviewed.

A large quantity of documentation was provided to the review team for inspection. This included details of the curricula structure, the content of degrees and modules, examples of students work including written comments from teachers, exam papers, examiners reports, accreditation papers, and student 'unit evaluations'.

In addition, a large number of teaching sessions, 20 in all, were observed, covering most staff. Employers were also asked about the quality of graduates from the programme, and students were interviewed to get their opinions, and make sure the course team did as it said it did in the self-evaluation document.

13.5 Evaluation of quality assurance by the course provider

13.5.1 General perceptions and evaluation of the verification points used

On balance, interviewees felt that the QAA subject review was less concerned about the industrial currency of provision, although that formed an important part of the review, and more about '*course design – what are we saying we are doing and what are we actually doing*'. In other words, whether what they said in the self-evaluation regarding their provision was true.

Interviewees did say that they thought subject benchmark statements would have influenced some of the questioning by the subject review team. However, this was not always explicitly obvious. According to one interviewee, the benchmark statements are by necessity quite broad in what they allow hospitality and tourism programs to cover.

Furthermore, subject benchmark statements will have influenced how the programme is designed, and how it is presented in the self-evaluation document. We have viewed, for example, the validation document for the Hospitality Programme, which presents a case for changing the course structure (see section 13.7).

In this document, suggested changes are tested against subject benchmark statements, to ensure the programme remains compatible with these external reference points. It is, therefore, not always easy to disentangle questioning by the subject review team influenced by the self-evaluation document, and questioning resulting from subject benchmarks.

It was also noted by interviewees that the six criteria reviewed, and the marks of up to four awarded for each, do not make explicit the degree of vocational relevance the programme has. However, the degree of vocational relevance did form a significant part of the review. This is perhaps not surprising, as the self-evaluation includes as an aim that they '*underpin the curricula with research, scholarly activities, consultancy and/or industry sector input.*'

According to one interviewee, this claim was tested by the review team, who asked for examples and evidence of where research, consultancy work, and industrial input, had influenced provision. For example, staff were questioned about how contact with employers involved in placements had influenced the content of provision, and these employers were contacted, in order to assess their involvement with the programme. From this, the review makes the conclusion that *'employers views are obtained through a range of formal and informal mechanisms, and excellent contact is maintained through specific industrial collaborative programmes'*. In this way, industrial involvement has been assessed, despite the absence of a formal industrial advisory board.

For the rest of section 13.5, we will examine other 'tools' by which the Hospitality Programme remains responsive to the needs of industry, as identified in the field work.

13.5.2 Placements

Interviewees for the Hospitality Programme thought that contact with employees, as a result of students going on industrial placements, was the most important way in which the course remains responsive to industry needs. As one interviewee explained:

> *'The main tool* [for labour market responsiveness] *for a course like this is the placement – all students work on a placement as part of their degree and need to be interviewed and visited at the company at least once.'*

Another interviewee points out that there are around 70 students in the first year who can be expected to go on to the second year, which means that academic staff will have to visit 70 companies in all sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry in the next year. As the above quote suggests, students are visited once or twice on their placement by a personal academic tutor, with whom they remain in regular contact with during the period. On these visits,

the company managers in charge of looking after the placement student will be interviewed, and in these instances, the visiting academic will usually be told about the issues of concern to that company. Students will also be debriefed about their experiences after they return, as well as doing a presentation on their time at the firm, which adds to the schools' knowledge about the issues facing the industry.

The interviewees also maintain that what they find out when talking to employers feeds into the way staff teach, the content of the syllabus in units of study, and might have some impact when they come to re-examine the course during revalidations.

13.5.3 Research

Sometimes, academic staff will find out about industrial needs of industry as a by-product of their research. For example, one lecturer in the Hospitality Programme has been conducting research into how hospitality trade groups attempt to influence government policy. As a result, the lecturer is interviewing people from relevant organisations, and is discovering in conversation the concerns of the industry.

On other occasions, research conducted by academic staff may be directly concerned with discovering the needs, and possible future needs, of employers. To give an example, one interviewee from the Hospitality Programme has been involved in a research project for the Higher Education Funding Council, and the Council for Hospitality Management Education (which represents institutions offering hospitality courses). The research covers a broad range of company types — in contract catering, hotels, leisure, licensed retail, restaurants, and welfare. In each of the six sub-sectors listed, five case studies of companies were conducted, ranging in size and operation. Added to this was a survey of 1,400 small firms in hospitality sectors.

The research aimed to '*explore the nature of work and skills required of managers in the* [hospitality] *industry, with a view to explore the relevance of the current curriculum and educational practise in higher education to the needs of managers*'. In the course of the research, employers were asked for their perceptions of hospitality degrees, and areas where improvements could be made. One deficiency within hospitality courses identified from the research was the lack of coverage of contract catering.

The research also indicated where the content of hospitality courses was moving in the right direction, in the opinions of employers. To give an example, the conclusion was reached that the shift in hospitality courses away from a technical understanding of cooking '*to a detailed appreciation of operating systems and concepts is what the vast majority of industry now requires of its managers.*' The report goes on to say that the research

indicates *'managers are much more likely to need to consider the changes in customer eating-out behaviours and their impact on roadside restaurants than how to fillet six different types of fish.'*

13.6 Evaluation by field of work

Unfortunately, stringent data protection laws in the UK, as well as a desire on the part of universities to not burden employers with which they have links, has meant that we have not had much contact with employers for the four case studies. The Engineering Programme was the only one of four reviewed for which we had access to employers, via their Industrial Advisory Board. Views of employers are presented by way of the survey findings in Part 3. However, it should be noted that the employers in question were not specifically from the hospitality sector.

13.7 Monitoring of quality assurance with regard to labour market relevance

Validation exercises are the aspect of internal quality assurance procedure that is most relevant to this study. Validation exercises are required when a course is introduced, and every five years thereafter. At each validation exercise, the subject provider, in particular the senior members of staff in the school, are required to justify the programme to a validation panel, chaired by a dean of a different faculty, and including representatives from industry.

In some instances, the validation exercise will be merely a case of justifying provision and making minor adjustments. The most recent validation exercise held for the Hospitality Programme, however, saw a major overhaul in the content and organisation of provision. As already stated, prior to the validation exercise, three separate and distinct courses were run: BA (Hons) Hotel Management; BA (Hons) Tourism Management; and BA (Hons) International Tourism Management. These courses were delivered as separate entities, with separate courses and student populations.

It was felt by academic staff that the course structure had shortcomings both in relation to the needs of industry, and student choices. Taking the issue of industrial needs first, it was felt that there had been significant changes in the hospitality and tourism industries since the introduction of the courses in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In particular, the tourism and hotel industries were becoming more intertwined. The importance of hospitality was also growing, with the introduction and growth, for example, of package holidays and global chains of restaurants and pubs (often connected to hotel chains). As was explained in the validation document, which was produced by senior academic staff in the school:

> *'The tourism and hospitality industries in the UK are now not as differentiated as they once were in the early 1990s as their interdependency is now recognised from central government down.'*

In this context, it was felt that three separate courses were outdated, as they made too great a division between these inter-related industries. It was also felt, as one interviewee put it, that the future needs of graduates from these fields were '*more issues-based now*', dealing with brand identity and customer satisfaction, which cuts across disciplines.

In relation to student choices, it was felt that having such distinctly different courses was forcing students to pursue a specialised area too early; they were having to decide which field of hospitality they would pursue without having attained a background understanding of the industry as a whole, or a chance to develop academic interests. It was decided that, given these factors, it would be sensible to introduce a single entry point to the courses — dubbed the 'Tourism and Hospitality Management Programme' — with a common first year, examining the management principles underpinning the industries. After this, students could choose courses that lead to the different types of degrees listed in section 13.2.

The validation document states that the decision for change was reached with debate from those in the school and faculty, and also:

> *'Industry players have been sounded out via an industry panel meeting in 1998, when the process began, and via personal contacts with managers through the placements office and visits. The latter form of contact is an important mechanism for keeping staff in touch with industry needs.'*

The 'evidence' for the assertions made in the validation document included the hospitality courses offered by other institutions, data on the numbers employed in different sectors of the industry, and the destinations of graduates. Changes were also judged explicitly on whether they are consistent with the course content parameters set out in the subject benchmark statements.

Overall, the validation exercise can be seen as an integral way in which the Hospitality Programme has remained in line with industry needs.

14. Marketing Programme

14.1 Institution

The Marketing Programme is that provided by Institution 2, a description of which is given in Chapter 12.

14.2 Description of programme

The 'Marketing Programme', for the purposes of the research, refers to the BA (Hons) Marketing at Institution 2. The Marketing Programme was reviewed alongside a relatively disparate range of courses, under the title 'Business and Management Economics'. This covered 11 courses, including undergraduate courses in Economics and Human Resources Management, and MScs in Charity Finance and Financial Management. The BA in Marketing therefore represents only one element of a much wider subject review. The Marketing Programme was chosen as a case study to investigate how much attention was placed on the labour market relevance of a single undergraduate degree by the QAA subject review, when it is reviewed alongside a number of distinctly different programmes, including one which is non-vocational (economics).

The Marketing Programme is only in its second year, and currently has around 90 students. There are 11 members of academic staff who teach the Marketing Programme, although they will also be involved in other degree courses, including joint honours degrees.

14.3 The quality of the programme

14.3.1 Results of the subject review

Table 14.1 gives the scores awarded for the Business and Management Economics review at Institution 2, which includes the Marketing Programme. As the table indicates, the subject review team awarded full marks of four in two areas: Student Support and Guidance, and Quality management and Enhancement. In the other four areas, scores of three were awarded, indicating that according the review panel, a

Table 14.1: Scores received in the QAA subject review for business and management economics (including the Marketing Programme)

Aspect of provision	Score
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	3
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	3
Student Progression and Achievement	3
Student Support and Guidance	4
Learning Resources	4
Quality Management and Enhancement	3

Note: **A score of 4**: 'This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.'
A score of 3: 'This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.'
A score of 2: 'This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.'
A score of 1: 'The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.'

Source: QAA Subject Reviews

'substantial' contribution has been made to achieving the stated aims and objectives presented in the self-evaluation document, with some scope for improvements.

Taking a closer look at the content of the review, under 'curriculum design, content, and organisation', it is clear that there was some variance described in the quality of the programmes. For example, the most serious deficiency in provision is in economics, for which it is said that '*insufficient quantitative underpinning currently exists to enable all students to achieve the stated objectives*'. There were no other specific problems identified, except that some units were not appropriate for the year group to which they were taught. They did not record, however, in which courses this concern was more prevalent.

The report was positive in regard to course currency and labour market relevance, although there was some variance between programmes in relation to contacts or links with employers. Charity MScs were noted for their strong links with employers, who were involved as visiting lecturers and via industrial placements of students. The report also noted that there was a business advisory panel, although it is unclear whether this covered more than just the Charity and Human Resource Management courses. In relation to undergraduate courses, it was said that '*the objective of applying techniques and theory to real-life environments is met in many undergraduate units*,' although it is not clear for which programmes this is particularly true.

It was also recorded that innovations in the curriculum, presumably for all courses, were made in line with research, and that professional bodies were involved in the validation process, which has been useful for curriculum development. Finally, it is

recorded that two of the programmes covered by the review were accredited to professional bodies, one of which was the Marketing Programme. The Marketing programmes gave exemptions to membership of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Overall, the report was positive in relation to the industrial currency and labour market relevance of the programmes covered, although there was variability between programmes. The biggest criticism made, which may have contributed largely to the failure to achieve full marks — the lack of quantitative emphasis in Economics — had nothing to do with the Marketing Programme.

'Teaching, learning and assessment' indicated that there was a policy across the courses to encourage independent learning, thorough a greater usage of course work assessment and more staff contact time during the first year of study. Teaching and learning methods were said to vary greatly, some of which, such as business simulations and student presentations, clearly had some relevance to the world of work. It does not, however, indicate if there was any variance between programmes in relation to this, and nor is it made clear in which programmes weaker teaching methods are identified. There were also some concerns about the consistency of marking, and although a system of second marking has been introduced, it is said to have been inconstantly applied.

Under 'student support and guidance' it was reported that there were school-level mechanisms for supporting students, which were effectively documented. The induction process was evaluated by students, enabling changes to be made, and was considered valuable by students, particularly by those in the Marketing Programme. All students had a personal tutor, and academic supervisors during dissertations or projects. Careers advice was also praised, and an overall score of four awarded.

'Learning resources' also received full marks of four. Praise was given to the effective utilisation of, and improvements to, teaching areas the IT provision which was considered '*in line with course developments*'; and the suitability of library facilities, opening hours, and holdings.

'Quality management and enhancement' reported that a University Academics Standards Committee had overall responsibility in this area, although day to day responsibility rested with individual schools and, primarily, course leaders, heads of division and unit co-ordinators. Quality processes were overseen by a Faculty Academic Standards Committee. Questionnaires are used to gauge student opinion on the content, delivery and assessment of individual units. Reports written on individual units, assembling student feedback and information from the teachers and external examiners, were said to be variable, however. Furthermore, it was said that concerns raised by external examiners were sometimes not managed effectively, with mistakes continuing every year.

On more positive notes, staff widely participated in peer teaching observation, to improve standards, and there was a university student satisfaction survey with questions on teaching, although this was not broken down into programme areas. Finally, it was reported that there was a staff development officer, which has helped in the use of the Internet and e-mail in particular, and staff were encouraged to take teaching qualifications, although it is said that there should be more targeting of staff development.

14.3.2 Verification points used

The aspects of provision for which scores are awarded were set by the QAA, and were identical for each subject review. The six aspects are explained in their entirety in section 8.2.4. Judgements about provision, which result in the scores being given for each aspect were in theory, based primarily on the aims and intended learning objectives set out in the self-evaluation document and the suggestions about curricula content and student achievements given in the subject benchmark statements. In reality, subject benchmarks have not been prepared for marketing, or included as a specific degree within broader benchmark statements, so the judgements made were based primarily on the aims and objectives of the self-evaluation.

There are eight overall aims for the programmes covered by the subject review. These include the following five aims which are arguably of most interest to this research:

- '*provide educational opportunities for a wide range of students, including those with less standard entry qualifications*'
- *'provide students with a contemporary, relevant and contextualised curriculum, covering an appropriate range of concepts, theories and principles for application to practical business situations'*
- *'develop and sharpen students' analytical, critical and interpretative skills'*
- '*equip students with the key subject-related skills (especially those related to decision-making and problem solving techniques and communication) necessary to develop their careers*'
- *'develop students' skills and potential to enable them to grow personally, academically, and professionally*'.

In addition to the eight overall aims, the self-evaluation gave 'objectives', expectations of what undergraduate students should be able to do in each of the three years. For example, on completion of year three the following objectives were given. The student should be able to:

- '*identify, criticise, evaluate and appropriately apply appropriate range of theories, concepts and issues to relevant practises disciplines*'

- *'apply key skills and techniques to the collection and analysis of data'*
- *'apply appropriately, to real-life environments, a mix of techniques relevant to the subject(s)'*
- '*demonstrate a range of personal transferable skills appropriate to future employment and/or personal development'*.

In addition, for the Marketing Programme, as distinct from other courses covered by the review, the following objectives were given — students will be able to:

- '*present, at varying levels of speculums, a repertoire of knowledge, skills and techniques of interest to a potential marketing employee'*
- *'develop skills for lifelong learning and for continuing and professional development within marketing'*.

14.3.3 Comparison with similar programmes elsewhere

Combining the scores of one to four in each of the six aspects of the review gives us an overall score. Calculating this for the Business and Management Economics review at Institution 2, of which the Marketing Programme is a part, reveals that a score of 20 out of a possible 24 was given. Our calculations, from each of the 130 published Business and Management reviews conducted between 1999 and 2001, reveal that a score of 20 was the average received. Three programmes, with overall scores of 13 to 15, were not approved, compared with seven which received full marks of 24.

Table 14.2 shows a breakdown of scores received for the six broad aspects of provision reviewed, for all Business and Management reviews published. As the table demonstrates, the distribution of scores received varies between the six areas covered. The only aspect of provision for which subject review reports were given scores of one, indicating that there would be non-approval of provision, was in the area of Quality Management and Enhancement. In this area, the majority of reports scored three, indicating that although measures were effective, improvements could be made. This was also the case for Teaching Learning and Assessment (for which 92 per cent scored three).

Student Support and Guidance, Learning Resources, and Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation, were all areas for which the majority of reports were awarded full scores of four.

Table 14.2: Scores given in business and management studies, all published subject reviews

	Score	No.	%
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	2	8	6
	3	56	43
	4	66	51
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	2	14	11
	3	92	71
	4	24	18
Student Progression and Achievement	2	3	2
	3	52	40
	4	75	58
Student Support and Guidance	2	1	1
	3	23	18
	4	106	82
Learning Resources	2	4	3
	3	39	30
	4	86	67
Quality Management and Enhancement	1	4	3
	2	24	18
	3	77	59
	4	25	19

Source: QAA Subject Review Reports

14.4 The quality assurance process

The QAA quality assurance process is explained in detail in Chapter 8. The fieldwork has identified no deviation from the procedures explained in Chapter 8. Scores of one to four were awarded for the six aspects of provision reviewed, assessed, at least in theory, on the self-evaluation aims and learning outcome objectives.

The self-evaluation document was written by panels representing each of the six aspects of provision reviewed. These panels, which included representatives from each of the degree courses covered by the subject review, also attended and answered questions at meetings with the review team during their visit. There was some overlap in membership between the six criteria panels.

Teaching was observed with most, if not all members of teaching staff. Given the short life of the Marketing Programme — two years — it was not possible for the QAA subject review team to question employers of students or graduates about the suitability of the provision to industry needs. The review team did, however, ask a panel of current students, who had volunteered, for their perceptions on the quality of the course provision. These

discussions occurred without the presence of staff. Given that these were interviews with present students, however, and not graduates who had worked in marketing, it is arguable that the discussions did not reveal much information on the relevance of the Marketing Programme to employer needs.

A large quantity of documentation was provided to the review team for inspection. This included:

- details of the curricula structure as a whole
- unit guides outlining the content and week-by-week coverage of individual modules, including learning aims and objectives, and methods of assessment
- timetables
- reflections on modules by course leaders and students (from completed questionnaires)
- examples of students presented alongside the feedback from staff and marks awarded
- external examiners reports.

The interview with a senior member of staff gave the impression that the preparation for the Business and Management Economics subject review, and in particular the assembling of documents, was less organised than in the other three case study programmes reviewed in this report. This, it was suggested, may have been because the courses covered in the review were diverse in subject area with, in some cases, weak organisational links. It was therefore, a hard task to co-ordinate and communicate effectively between courses, because this in not normally how the courses covered by the Business and Management Economics subject review usually operate. The communication difficulties were emphasised by the interviewee, who said that a senior member of staff within the school did not understand the significance of the review, or contribute sufficiently to its preparation.

14.5 Evaluation of quality assurance by the course provider

14.5.1 General perceptions and evaluation of the verification points used

It was the opinion of the interviewee from the Marketing Programme that the degree course suffered in the allocation of scores because of the assessments of other courses unconnected to hers. In particular, it was felt that in the most important area, Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation, that the programmes failed to attain the highest marks of four because economics was not deemed quantitative enough.

The interviewee stressed the importance of the marks awarded in the subject review for marketing the course to students. Students, she claimed, would be drawn more strongly to courses that had received high scores in the subject review. However, the marks associated with her programme were dependent on other courses unconnected to hers.

Beyond the fact that the economics provision was in no way connected to her course, it concerned the interviewee that the aims of the two courses, Economics and Marketing, were very different, and so being assessed in the same review was unsuitable. She argued that the purpose of the marketing degree, in her opinion, was to produce an employable individual for the profession. Economics, on the other hand, she considers to be an academic degree which, like other non-vocational degrees such as English literature, are not primarily for this purpose.

After some probing, she agreed with the suggestion that it might be better to include vocational and 'academic' degrees in different subject reviews. According to the interviewee, questions were asked about the currency and labour market relevance of the marketing degree in the QAA review. In particular, there was discussion about the 'live case studies' which form part of the programme. A live case study is where a guest speaker from industry (for example a designer) brings in a product, explains about its capabilities, and students are asked to formulate a mock marketing campaign. This is intended to mirror the kinds of tasks that graduates would be expected to complete.

On the whole, however, the interviewee felt the QAA review did not focus heavily enough on the relevance of the course to employers; more time was spent examining the quality assurance policies and procedures within the course, school and university.

Students, she felt, would be drawn to courses that would make them more employable (in other words, courses which provide employers with what they want). However, the marking scheme, based on the six aspects of provision specified by the QAA, did not make the vocational relevance of courses immediately explicit.

14.5.2 Other tools: professional background of staff

According to the interviewee, the first thing to consider when reflecting on the labour market relevance of the Marketing Programme, is the professional backgrounds of staff. Of the 11 members of staff in the Marketing division, seven, according to the university website, have come from professional backgrounds, whilst the rest appear to have had a more academic route into their position (*eg* through PhDs and research). Consequently, the staff as a whole have a wide range of experience, much of it very high level, in marketing positions before joining the university.

14.5.3 Contacts with employers

The Marketing Programme does not have an industrial advisory committee or group. According to the interviewee from the programme (a senior member of academic staff with key responsibility in managing the course), the school as a whole has an industrial advisory board. However, the Marketing Programme has not had access to this board, and she knows little about its operation. There were some attempts to set a board up for the Marketing Programme, but this did not meet with any success in terms of attracting individuals.

Despite the lack of an industrial advisory board, the interviewee states that the course does have external industrial contacts, albeit on an informal basis. As a demonstration of this, the course has no problems in attracting one-off lectures from people in industry. Industrial contacts may also be consulted on the content of courses. For example, for a product marketing course that the interviewee was putting together, four or five business people working in this branch of marketing were sought for information on the areas they thought relevant for the course.

Informal contacts can, and are, made in a number of ways. Firstly, because of the professional backgrounds of staff, many contacts are from their working lives prior to joining the university. In addition to this, some contacts are made with employers who have taken students on industrial placements. Alternatively, contacts with companies may be made as a result of the teaching company scheme, which the Marketing Programme is involved in. Under this scheme, a recent graduate is employed by a company for, in this case, a marketing role, and the Marketing Programme provides an academic to assist the graduate with a commercial project. The Marketing Programme gets some funding from the Department of Trade and Industry; the company gets the chance to develop a project it otherwise would not have been able to; and the member of academic staff is able to learn from the project and make contacts within company.

14.6 Evaluation by field of work

Unfortunately, stringent data protection laws in the UK, as well as a desire on the part of universities to not burden employers with which they have links, has meant that we have not had much contact with employers for the four case studies. The Engineering programme was the only one of four reviewed for which we had access to employers, via their Industrial Advisory Board. Views of employers are presented by way of the survey findings in Part 3, however, it should be noted that the employers in question were not specifically from the marketing sector.

14.7 Monitoring of quality assurance with regard to labour market relevance

Validation exercises are the aspect of internal quality assurance procedure which is most relevant to this study. Validation exercises are required when a course is introduced, and every five years there after. At each validation exercise the subject provider, in particular the senior members of staff in the school, are required to justify the programme to a validation panel, headed by a dean of a different faculty, and including representatives from industry. The representation from industry is compulsory, and it is hoped this will ensure the perspectives of employers are included.

The Marketing Programme has only been in existence for two years, so there has been one validation exercise, in which the creation of the course was approved. Prior to this, marketing modules had been offered by Institution 2, to be taken by students of other disciplines, but not available as part of a single Honours degree. The introduction of the marketing programme as a single Honours degree stemmed from the recognition within the department that there was sufficient demand amongst students to pursue such a degree, and sufficient teaching resources to provide it.

In setting up the Marketing Programme, the Faculty Academic Standards Committee (FASC), who oversee the quality assurance of the faculty, met with the course team and agreed in principle to the introduction of a single Honours marketing degree. FASC then set up a validation panel which included academics in the field, but external to Institution 2, and business people. In this instance there were two industrialists: '*an advertising man and a product person*'.

The documentation produced for the validation included the structure of the degree, the manner in which students would be assessed, and descriptions of all the proposed modules offered. Evidence provided within the documentation focused primarily on the demand amongst students for the degree (admission rates, student feedback *etc*). However, the representatives from industry would have the opportunity to ask questions about the content of the degree programme, and this would have been anticipated by staff prior to the meeting.

Obviously, over time, revalidation exercises including industrialists from the relevant industry, will *aim* to ensure the content of the programme remains in line with employer needs.

Part 3:
Survey of Employers

15. Introduction to Employers Survey

15.1 Introduction

In Part 1, we examined the history, structure and quality assurance processes of higher vocational education in the UK. One of the aspects of Part 1, identifying how courses remain responsive to the needs of the labour market, was examined further in the case studies in Part 2. These case studies allowed academic staff within higher vocational education to explain how they felt their courses remained responsive to the needs of the labour market, and the degree to which quality assurance processes were related to this. Part 3 extends the perspectives covered in the report by seeking employers views.

Perspectives were collected by way of a survey of engineering and librarian employers. Employers of librarians and engineers were chosen as the subjects of the survey because librarianship and engineering were two of the four case study degree programmes investigated in Part 2. The two sectors of employment were noted to be considerably different in terms of their activities, and it was expected that there would be some variability in terms of perspectives offered by engineers and librarians. As a consequence, some of the findings in this report have been disaggregated by the two sectors.

Part 3 is structred as follows:

- Chapter 16 examines employers' links with higher education institutions offering degree courses in engineering or librarianship. Towards the end of the section, the discussion addresses whether respondents have employed graduates from HEIs with which they have links, and the competencies of such individuals.
- Chapter 17 looks at respondents' views on a range of subjects related to higher education, in particular on the labour market relevance of degree programmes, responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance in courses, and the involvement of employers in degree provision. These findings were arrived at by providing respondents with statements to which they could agree or disagree.

- Concluding remarks on the survey findings are presented in Chapter 18.

Part 3 predominately examines the views of respondents as a single group. However, it also refers to the responses of three groups within the sample: engineers, librarians, and respondents with links to higher education institutions (HEI). Rather than present all this additional data in the main body of the report, we have decided, for the purposes of lucidity, to give it in the appendix.

15.2 Methodology

15.2.1 Survey design

The survey was designed by our Dutch partners, REVICE, for use by all the European partners in the LABMAQUAL project. An initial draft was circulated, and comments and suggestions were made by the partners.

One of the key concerns we had was that in the UK, it would be very difficult for us to get lists of employers with links to the universities we were conducting the case studies in. Data protection laws prohibit the passing of information held on individuals or organisations to third parties. As we were not a part of the universities we were conducting the case studies in, we could not obtain this information. In fact, this presupposes that institutions hold information on employers with whom they have links. In reality, as our case study research showed, links between higher education institutions and employers are often informal, so such information may not be held centrally.

As a result of this concern, REVICE amended the questionnaire to enable completion by employers without links to an HEI. This meant that we were able to send the questionnaire to employers from commercially-available lists.

Obviously we had to make a decision about what kinds of employers we sent the questionnaire to, and it was decided that companies or organisations employing engineers, and those employing librarians, were appropriate. However, the term 'higher vocational education degrees', used in the provided questionnaire, it was felt, would mean less to an English audience than elsewhere in Europe, where a stricter division between 'vocational' and 'academic' degrees is made (employers would not keep information on 'vocational' graduates employed by their organisation. Anxious to obtain as high a response rate as possible, the decision was taken to send two questionnaires out, one to each group of employers. The questionnaires were identical, except that the questionnaire for engineering companies referred to 'engineering degrees', and the questionnaire for employers of librarians referred to 'librarianship' degrees, in both cases instead of 'higher vocational degrees'.

15.2.2 The sample

It was decided that the sample should cover London and the South East of England — the regions in which the case studies were conducted. The samples were to consist of employers of librarians and employers of engineers. Note that this did not necessarily mean libraries and engineering firms exclusively, although most were these types of organisations. Schools or large organisations may, for example, include a library; companies not exclusively engaged in engineering may employ engineers. So the sample was, therefore, made up predominately, although not exclusively, of libraries and engineering firms.

The sample was provided by Dun and Bradstreet, who provide the names of organisations to commercial organisations. There was a limit to the level of information that could be provided, but we were given the name and address of each employer in the sample, the name of a contact, and their job title.

15.2.3 Response rate

We wanted responses from employers with a keen interest in engineering/librarianship higher education, preferably with direct links to HEIs. These individuals, it was felt, would be more informed about higher education. Without a list of such individuals, we used a reasonably big mail-out to obtain responses from this smaller group of engaged employers. Consequently, the response rate to what was effectively a rather specialised survey was low, although we can infer that those that did respond have a particular interest in higher vocational education. Furthermore, no attempt was made to obtain a representative sample of employers as a whole. By virtue of the fact that the other European surveys focus only on those employers with links to a particular higher education institution, the respondents cannot be said to be representative of employers as a whole.

In the end, after a month in the field and a written reminder, we got a response rate of 16 per cent, corresponding to 173 questionnaires (see Table 15.1) — enough to do a fair amount of analysis.

Table 15.1: Response rates of the engineering and librarianship surveys

	Questionnaires sent out	Questionnaires received	Response rate %
Engineering	725	120	16.6
Libraries	386	53	13.7
Total	*1,111*	*173*	*15.6*

Note: 'Questionnaires sent out' does not include questionnaires returned to us, either because the organisation no longer exists or because it is specified as being of no relevance to them. Likewise, where a joint response has been returned (*eg* covering a number of libraries in a local area), the number of questionnaires sent out has been adjusted accordingly. Questionnaires received include a few returned after the closing date and not included in the data analysis.

Source: IES Survey 2002

To reiterate, the results presented here are indicative of respondents with a particular interest in, and preferably links with, higher vocational education (a willingness to respond to such a survey). They are not, and were not intended to be, representative of the librarianship/employer populations as a whole.

15.3 Profile of respondents

15.3.1 Size of respondent organisations

Table 15.2 gives the number of employees in the engineering companies/organisations responding to the survey. Table 15.3 gives the same information for employers of librarians responding to the survey.

As a comparison of the tables reveals, the responding engineering companies were, on average, larger than the employers of librarians. The mean number of employees for engineering respondents was just above 1,145, compared with almost 81 for employers of librarians. However, these averages mask a fair degree of variability, and are inflated by a few very large cases (the median number of employees [not shown] are 62.5 and 35 respectively for engineering and librarianship employees). It is also noticeable that over 36 per cent of organisations on the library sample had less than 20 employees, compared with only two per cent for engineering companies responding to the survey. At the other end of the spectrum, the proportion of large companies (those with over 150 employees) is relatively similar for both groups. However, in the case of the library sample, some of these can be accounted for by joint responses, covering more than one library.

Table 15.2: Number of employees: employers of engineers

	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
10-19	2	2	2
20-29	9	8	10
30-39	15	13	23
40-49	13	12	35
50-99	35	31	66
100-149	12	11	77
150-199	8	7	84
200+	18	16	100
Total	*112*	*100*	
Mean	1,145.45		

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table 15.3: Number of employees: employers of librarians

	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
1-9	9	18	18
10-19	9	18	36
20-29	4	8	44
30-39	4	8	52
40-49	2	4	56
50-99	8	16	72
100-149	3	6	78
150-199	4	8	86
200+	7	14	100
Total	*50*	*100*	
Mean	80.68		

Source: IES Survey 2002

On the whole, however, given the low response rate, it must be remembered that the organisations cannot be considered representative in terms of employee numbers. In fact, it is fair to hypothesise that the respondent base over-represents larger employers in each of the sectors, and it may be wise to consider this when examining the tables.

As a final point, it is worth noting that graduate engineers constitute a smaller proportion of staff within engineering firms than graduate librarians do within libraries.[1] The average proportion of graduate engineers within engineering employers was 7.5 per cent, compared with 21 per cent of graduate librarians on the library side.

[1] Strictly speaking, the sample includes employers of librarians whose main function is not libraries or information management — *eg* a company that has a library and therefore employs librarians. However, for the purpose of lucidity, we shall henceforth use the term 'libraries' to mean employers of librarians.

16. Employers' Links with Engineering/ Librarianship HEIs

This chapter examines respondents links with HEIs offering librarianship or engineering degrees, depending on the respondent type. Section 17.1 examines a range of issues relating to this:

- whether respondents have links to HEIs
- where HEIs with respondent links are located
- what types of links exist
- how aware respondents are of the content of degree programmes with which they have links
- how much influence respondents feel they exert over degree programmes with which they have links.

Section 16.2 examines whether respondents have employed graduates, or taken on placement students, from HEIs with which they have links. In addition, section 16.2 details respondents' views on the degree to which the competencies of graduates/ placement students met with their company's needs.

16.1 Employers links with HEIs

16.1.1 Whether respondents have links with HEIs

In order to get an indication of their involvement with higher education courses, respondents were asked early in the questionnaire whether they had links with higher education institutions offering engineering or librarianship degree programmes.[1] The results are presented in Table 16.1. The proportions with links to an HEI are fairly high — 47 per cent for employers of engineers and 30 per cent for employers of librarians. The proportion of respondents with links to an HEI are much higher than can realistically be expected within the wider employer population, indicating that questionnaire recipients

[1] The two types of questionnaire refer exclusively to engineering or librarianship degrees, depending on the sample to which the respondent belongs.

Table 16.1: Whether respondent has links with a higher education institution offering engineering/librarianship degrees

	Engineering		Librarianship		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Has links	47	41	15	30	62	38
No links	58	51	27	54	85	52
Don't know	9	8	8	16	17	10
Total	*114*	*100*	*50*	*100*	*164*	*100*

Source: IES Survey 2002

were indeed more likely to respond to the survey if they had links with higher education.

16.1.2 The locations of HEIs with respondent links

As a follow up question, respondents were asked which HEIs they have links with, and were allowed to mention more than one. We have divided the HEIs into their respective geographical regions, to get an idea of how far from the employer's bases in London/the South East the links stretch The results are presented in Table 16.2; note that the total number of links with institutions (93) is higher than the number of respondents with links (62). This is because some respondents had links to more than one HEI.

As the table shows, the majority of HEIs with which respondents have links are in London or the wider South East, and therefore

Table 16.2: Geographical location of higher education institutions with which respondents have links (regions)

	No.	%
South East	31	33
London	29	31
East England	4	4
East Midlands	9	10
North East	3	3
North West	0	0
South West	3	3
West Midlands	2	2
Yorkshire & Humber	4	4
Wales	3	3
Scotland	2	2
Abroad	3	3
Total	*93*	*100*

Base: All respondents with links to at least one HEI (62)

Source: IES Survey 2002

relatively close to the employers themselves. This is perhaps not surprising, as we would expect respondent organisations to have links with HEIs that are reasonably nearby. However, it is important to note that a large minority of the institutions with which respondents have links are outside of London or the South East (36 per cent). This can perhaps be accounted for by employers seeking specialisms within university departments, which cannot be met by local HEIs. As the table shows, some employers have links with institutions abroad, perhaps in an attempt to access knowledge on a very specialist field of engineering, or to attract employees where shortages exist.

In the UK, some (mainly long-standing) universities recruit students on a national basis, and many of these students return to their home region to work on graduation (Perryman *et al.,* 2003). Some of our respondents may be reflecting this trend.

16.1.3 The types of links respondents have with HEIs

Many of the links between HEIs and employers appear to be informal in nature.

Respondents were additionally asked which of the links listed in Table 16.3 they had, in regard to the HEI with which they have most contact. As a comparison of Tables 16.1 and 16.3 shows, a few respondents did not claim to links in the former, but then subsequently noted links when presented with a list in the latter. This indicates that some employers may have links with HEIs, but do not see them as such, perhaps because of the informal nature of the contacts and involvement.

Table 16.3: Types of links respondents have with higher education institutions

	Engineering		Librarianship		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Informal links via personal contacts	34	68	8	53	42	65
Official links via personal contacts	34	68	7	47	41	63
Links via formal workshops/meetings	19	38	3	20	22	34
Links via formal committees	9	18	1	7	10	15
Links via filling in questionnaires	14	28	4	27	18	28
Links via training activities	14	28	7	47	21	32
Links via other activity (1)	9	18	1	7	10	15
Links via other activity (2)	–	–	1	7	1	2
Total	*50*	*100*	*15*	*100*	*65*	*100*

Base: All respondents specifying at one of the links listed in Table 2.3

Note: The number totals are of all those mentioning a link to a HEI. As respondents may have more than one link, the percentages and numbers given do not equal the totals at the bottom of the table

Source: IES Survey 2002

Such an assessment is partly borne out by the large proportion of respondents with links to an HEI who selected 'personal contacts', either formal or informal, as a method by which the link takes place. Sixty-five per cent of those selecting at least one link with an HEI give '*informal links via personal contacts*' as a method by which these links operate. The similar proportion selecting '*official links via personal contacts*', 63 per cent, suggests that respondents have a mixture of formal and informal links, or consider their relationship with a contact to have both formal and informal sides.

Of the 11 respondents who listed an 'other' form of contact or involvement, four specified what their links were. Three respondents gave answers that can be labelled under the banner 'research and development', and one listed 'membership', although it was not clear what of.

Analysis by size of employer (not shown) indicates that larger respondent organisations were more likely to have links with an HEI, as we would expect in the wider employer populations. Thirty-one per cent of all respondent employers with less than 50 employees (n = 12) had links to an HEI, compared with 68 per cent of employers with 50 or more employees (n = 50).

16.1.4 Awareness of degree programmes

All respondents with some form of link to an HEI were asked how aware they felt they were, or the wider company was, about the content and teaching of the programme with which they had most links. The results are displayed in Table 16.4. Whilst a majority, 55 per cent, felt they were either 'very well aware' or 'rather well aware', a sizeable minority, 45 per cent, were either 'hardly aware' or did not know. This indicates that the level of involvement respondents have with the degree programmes varies widely, and in many cases they are not well informed about the content or teaching.

These results are interesting in that they suggest a relatively low level of awareness among those employers most engaged with

Table 16.4: Awareness within the employer organisation of the content and teaching of the degree programme with which they have most links

	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Very well aware	12	19	19
Rather well aware	23	36	55
Hardly aware	23	36	91
Don't know	6	9	100
Total	*64*	*100*	–

Base: All respondents with links to an HEI (as given in Table 2.3)

Source: IES Survey 2002

HEIs — *ie* they took part in the survey and declared at least some form of link.

Analysis by strength of links (not shown) indicates that those with more formalised links are more likely to be aware of the content of the HEI courses. Only 28 per cent (n = 30) of those with *only* informal links, defined as 'informal personal contacts' and/or 'filling in questionnaires', were 'very' or 'rather well aware'. In comparison, 65 per cent (n = 51) of those with more formalised links were 'rather' or 'very aware' of the course content *etc.* (formalised links were: official links via personal contacts; links via formal workshops/meetings; via formal committees; or training activities).

Similarly, larger respondent organisations were more likely to be aware of course content. Twenty-seven per cent of employers with less than 50 staff were either 'very' or 'rather well' aware of the content of the course in question, compared with 60 per cent for those with 50 or more employees (n = 3 and 20 respondents respectively).

16.1.5 Influence exerted on degree programmes

As a follow up question, respondents were asked how much influence they, or the wider company, exerted on the content/ teaching of the course or programme with which they have most links. The answers are presented in Table 16.5. A minority, 45 per cent, positively state that they exert some influence over the course. A much smaller minority, 11 per cent, say that the impact they have on the course content/teaching is 'substantial'. Forty-five per cent, on the other hand, state that they have no influence over the course content or teaching. Evidently, on the whole, responding employers with links to institutions feel that their influence over course content and teaching is marginal.

Those 29 respondents who did feel they influenced the content or teaching of the degree programme, at least to some degree, were

Table 16.5: Degree of influence respondent feels his employer organisation has over course content and teaching

	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Substantial	7	11	11
A little	22	34	45
None at all	29	45	91
Don't know	6	9	100
Total	*64*	*100*	–

Base: Respondents with links to Higher Education Institution(s), who were asked the question in relation to the degree programme with which they had most links

Source: IES Survey 2002

then asked how this influence was mainly exerted (Table 16.6). Note that each respondent was allowed to select more than one method of exerting influence, from the list in Table 16.3. Table 16.6 reveals a similar pattern to Table 16.3: the most important factors were personal informal and official links with contacts from the courses.

Analysis by formality of link (not shown) indicates that respondents with more formal links were more likely to feel they exert some influence over the course in question. Exactly half of respondents with a 'formal link' said they exerted 'substantial or 'a little' influence (n = 23), compared with one-third of those with less formal links (n = 6). Less formal links were defined as 'informal personal contacts' and/or 'filling in questionnaires' only; formal links were having at least one of the other contacts listed on Table 16.6.

The same pattern is evident when analysis by size of respondent organisation is done. Forty-six per cent of respondents with 50 or more employees answering the question, said that they exerted a 'substantial' or 'a little' influence, compared with only 20 per cent of employers with less than 50 members of staff. Indeed, no respondents with less than 50 members of staff said that the influence they exerted was 'substantial.'

16.2 Employers links with HEIs via graduate employment and student placements

One possible reason for employers maintaining links with degree programmes is suggested by Table 16.7. Fifty-five per cent of engineering respondents, and 87 per cent of library respondents, said that they employ, or have employed, graduates/students

Table 16.6: The main ways in which employer organisations exerted influence over the degree programme with which they had most links

	No.	%
Exert influence via informal links with personal contacts	19	66
Exert influence via official links with personal contacts	15	52
Exert influence via workshops/meetings	8	28
Exert influence via formal committees	8	28
Exert influence via filling in questionnaires	7	24
Exert influence via training activities	5	17
Exert influence via other activity (1)	1	3
Exert influence via other activity (2)	1	3
Total	*29*	*100*

Base: All respondents who had either 'substantial' or 'a little' influence over course content/teaching. See Questions 5 and 6 in Appendices 9 and 10

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table 16.7: Whether respondent's organisation has employed graduates, or taken students on placement, from the degree programme with which they have links

	Engineering		Librarianship		All	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Employ/ed graduates from programme	28	55	13	87	41	62
Have/had students from this programme	26	51	5	33	31	47
No graduates/students	16	31	2	13	18	27
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	*51*	*100*	*15*	*100*	*66*	*100*

Base: Respondents with links to at least one HEI (see Table 2.3)

Source: IES Survey 2002

from the courses with which they have most contact. This suggests that respondents may make links with HEIs partly in order to find suitable staff. In some cases, it is sensible to hypothesise that placement students later became employees.

16.2.1 Employers views on graduate engineers and librarians

All those respondents who had either taken on student placements or employed graduates from the HEI with which they had most links, were asked how closely the competencies of these individuals met with the employer's needs. Forty-seven respondents answered the question; the results are presented in Table 16.8. The majority, 77 per cent, said that the students/ graduates' competencies had met with the employers needs, at least 'to a sufficient degree'.

In order to get a more detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of graduates/placement students from the course in question, respondents were asked to rate a number of competency areas for the individuals concerned. The competency areas are listed on Table 16.9, alongside the respondents' assessments of whether the graduates/students are 'good' in regard to each, or whether there is a need for improvement.

Table 16.8: How closely competencies of graduates/placement students from the HEI with which they have most links, met with the employer's needs

	Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
To a great degree	6	13	13
To a sufficient degree	30	64	77
Insufficiently	11	23	100
Total	*47*	*100*	–

Base: Respondents who have employed graduates, or taken on placement students, from the HEI with which they have most links

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table 16.9: Whether competencies are good or need improvement, amongst graduate employees from the institution with which they have links (percentages)

	Good	Need to be improved	Unnecessary for job	Don't know	Total	(n)
Capability to learn	83	15	0	2	100	48
Numerical skills	69	21	2	8	100	48
Subject knowledge	66	30	0	4	100	47
Professional attitude	65	33	0	2	100	48
Practical skills	42	54	2	2	100	48
Problem solving capacity	37	57	0	7	100	46
Social and communication skills	36	55	2	6	100	47
Language skills	26	49	13	13	100	47
Stress resistancy	23	51	2	23	100	47

Source: IES Survey 2002

As the table shows, students were rated highly on 'capability to learn', 'numerical skills', 'subject knowledge', and 'professional attitude' (with between 65 and 83 per cent rating these 'good'). Areas which stand out as being unsatisfactory, with high scores for 'need to be improved', were 'practical skills', 'problem solving capacity', and 'social and communication skills'. In each of these areas, over half of respondents stated that there was a 'need for improvement'.

17. Employers' Views of Higher Education

In the final section of the questionnaire, respondents' views on a number of issues related to higher education were sought; the findings are presented in Chapter 17.

Respondents were provided with 18 statements to which they could state their agreement, either fully or partially, or their disagreement. An option of recording 'don't know' was also included. The ordering of the questions did not, deliberately, follow a logical pattern, so that any agreement or disagreement with contradictory statements could be noted. We have taken the liberty of assembling the statements in broad thematic clusters, as represented in Tables 17.1 to 17.4, to allow a more lucid discussion of the findings. Against these statements are the percentages of respondents agreeing, disagreeing, or being unaware.

Clearly, the responses are likely to differ depending on whether the respondent is from the engineering or library samples, or whether they have links with an HEI degree programme. For this reason, we have produced data in the format of Tables 17.1 to 17.4 in the Appendix:

- for engineering respondents (Appendix, section A1.1)
- for library respondents (Appendix, section A1.2)
- and for those with links to an HEI (Appendix, section A1.3).

The ordering of the tables in the Appendix follows the ordering of tables they correspond to in this section. For example, Table A1.1a

Table 17.1: Whether respondents agree with the statements provided: The economy and higher education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	(n)
Engineering/librarianship degree programmes are vital for the national economy	51	39	6	4	100	163
Engineering/librarianship degree programmes are vital for the regional/local economy	39	47	9	5	100	163
In future, half of the working population should experience higher education	30	38	23	8	100	162

Source: IES Survey 2002

is the same as Table 17.1, except that it relates to engineering — rather than all — respondents. In the same way, Table 17.2 corresponds to Tables A1.1b, A1.2b, and A1.3b, depending on the population in question.

The discussion in this section will focus on 'all' respondents, but there will also be some references to variability amongst the groups represented in the Appendix.

17.1.1 The economy and higher education

Table 17.1 gives the responses to statements on the necessity of engineering/librarianship degrees to the national and local economies, and on the importance of the government's long-term policy of half of the population experiencing higher education. As the table shows, the vast majority of respondents agree, either fully or partially, that engineering/librarianship degrees are vital for the national and local economy. In particular, over half of all respondents, 51 per cent, fully agree that engineering/librarianship degrees are vital for the national economy. Respondents with links were marginally more likely to agree that engineering/ librarianship degrees are economically important.

However, on this point it is important to note that there is considerable difference in responses between the librarian/ engineering samples. Only 25 per cent of library respondents agree fully that librarianship degrees are vital for the national economy (Table A1.2a), compared with the 63 per cent of engineers rating engineering degrees in this way (Table A1.1a). Librarianship degrees are considered of some importance to the local and national economies, however: 55 per cent agree partially with the relevant statements.

Generally, most respondents agreed that in future, half of the working population should experience higher education, although those with links were less enthusiastic than those without links.

17.1.2 The labour market relevance of courses

Table 17.2 gives the percentage responses to statements that can be broadly grouped under the heading '*the labour market relevance of courses*'. One of the striking findings from the table is the 63 per cent agreeing fully with the statement that teaching staff should be more concerned with future competency needs in developing courses. Interestingly, the proportion of library respondents agreeing fully with this statement (75 per cent) is higher than that within the engineering sample (58 per cent) (see Tables A1.1b and A1.2b). One possible explanation for this is the move within libraries from information stored on paper, to electronic storage. Clearly, electronic information storage and retrieval requires different and changing skills. This needs to be addressed in the curriculum.

Table 17.2: Whether respondents agree with the statements provided: The labour market relevance of courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	(n)
Engineering/librarianship degree teaching staff really understand current competency needs of employers	11	37	28	25	100	163
Teaching staff should be more concerned with future competency needs of employers when developing the content of courses	63	32	1	4	100	162
It is sufficient that the content of the course is adapted to current, rather than future, competencies required by employers	2	22	72	4	100	162
The quality of engineering/librarianship degrees should be an important issue for employers	60	34	3	4	100	161
Labour market relevance should be one of the major criteria in the evaluation of degree quality	9	49	34	8	100	161

Source: IES Survey 2002

One other interesting finding is that a large number of respondents, a quarter, answered that they did not know whether teaching staff understood their needs as employers. This is consistent with earlier suggestion made that some employers foster links with HEI degree programmes to attract staff, rather than influence the content of provision, and therefore they are not fully aware of what students learn. The proportion not knowing whether staff understand their needs is the same for both the engineering and the library sub-samples — 25 per cent (see Tables A1.1b and A1.2b). Those with links with an HEI were less likely to answer that they 'don't know' in regard to this question, and consequently more likely to agree that degree staff understand their needs (see Table A1.3b). This suggests, although the small response rate should be borne in mind, that the more respondents knew about the content of courses — via HEI links — the more they were content that their competency needs as employers were understood.

On a final point in regard to Table 17.2, only nine per cent fully agree with the statement that labour market relevance should be *one* of the major criteria for assessing degree quality. The fact that almost half (49 per cent) state that they agree partially with the statement, and a large minority disagree with it (34 per cent), indicates that respondents appear to be saying that there are other factors more important in assessing the quality of a degree than its relevance to the labour market.

17.1.3 Responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance

Table 17.3 gives responses to statements concerning where responsibility lies for ensuring labour market relevance in engineering/librarianship degree programmes. On the issue of whether respondents should be well informed about teaching and

Table 17.3: Whether respondents agree with the statements provided: Responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance in courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	(n)
Employers should be well informed about the organisation and teaching assessment methods of librarianship/ engineering programmes which are relevant to them	37	49	9	6	100	163
Employers only responsibility to librarianship/engineering education is in supplying placements, traineeships for students	3	25	66	5	100	161
Employers are the best people to make statements about labour market relevance of engineering/librarianship degrees programmes	19	61	8	12	100	159
Employers representatives and professional bodies are the best people to comment on the relevance of librarianship/ engineering degrees programmes	16	66	9	9	100	162
The prime responsibility for making sure that librarianship/ engineering degree programmes adapt to the needs of the labour market lies with the degree-providing education institutions	24	44	24	8	100	160

Source: IES Survey 2002

assessments methods, a large majority fully or partially agree with the statement. However, it should be remembered that the respondent sample is probably biased towards organisations with an interest in being involved in higher education, by virtue of the kinds of employers who would respond to the survey. Nevertheless, amongst respondents to this survey, this constitutes the vast majority (86 per cent).

Clearly, respondents felt that, on the whole, employers should be involved in HEI programmes to more than a marginal degree — 66 per cent stated that they did not agree that employers only responsibility to librarianship/engineering degrees was in the provision of placements for students. Interestingly, the proportion of respondents to the library questionnaire disagreeing with the statement was higher than the proportion of 'engineers' disagreeing (82 per cent compared with 59 per cent — see tables A1.1c and A1.2c).

Sixty-one per cent of respondents *partially* agree that employers are the best people to make statements about the labour market relevance of courses. At the same time, a large proportion, 44 per cent, partially agree that the prime responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance within degree programmes lies with the HEI. By *partially* agreeing with these seemingly contradictory statements, respondents seem to be saying that although employer input can potentially be very important, the importance of HEI staff cannot be overlooked in this regard.

Table 17.4: Whether respondents agree with the statements provided: The involvement of employers in higher education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	(n)
Employers should be involved in defining the content of degree courses	33	58	6	4	100	162
Employers should provide feedback to higher education institutions on their satisfaction with graduate recruits	62	34	2	2	100	162
Employers should be well informed about the content of engineering/librarianship degree programmes which are relevant for them	55	39	4	2	100	163
Employers and teachers should co-operate closely in developing curricula for engineering/librarianship degree programmes	57	38	3	3	100	160
Employers should actively participate in the teaching of engineering/librarianship degree programmes	47	39	7	6	100	158

Source: IES Survey 2002

17.1.4 The involvement of employers in higher education

Table 17.4 looks in some more detail at the involvement, or desired involvement, of employers in higher education. The table confirms that respondents feel employer involvement in education should be an important factor in developing courses and teaching. Ninety per cent of respondents agree, fully or partially, that employers should be involved in defining the content of courses. Furthermore, 94 per cent agree that employers and teachers should co-operate closely in developing curricula for engineering/librarianship degree programmes; 57 per cent agree fully with the proposition. In addition, in principle at least, 87 per cent feel that employers should be actively involved in the teaching of such degree programmes. Once again, it must be reiterated that the sample is probably biased towards employers who have more inclination to be involved with higher education, but it shows that there is a will and a desire on the part of some employers to actively engage with curricula and teaching.

18. Conclusions to the Employers Survey

It is difficult to make too many inferences about the wider engineer/librarian employer populations from the findings in this report. Nevertheless, it is wise to assume, given the subject of the survey, that the employers responding were more likely to be knowledgeable about, and take a keen interest in, higher education. Such an assessment is backed up by the large proportion of respondents with links to HEIs offering engineering/ librarianship degrees. The respondent base should therefore be viewed as being overly-representative of employers with an interest, and perhaps involvement, in engineering /librarianship training.

Having said this, a large minority of respondents with links to an HEI claimed to have little or no knowledge about the content of the courses themselves. In such cases, it can perhaps be inferred that the links are kept partially as a source of future employees. Indeed, the proportion of respondents who had employed a graduate or taken on a placement student from the HEI with which they had most links, was remarkably high. Where a respondent had taken on such a graduate or student, just over two-thirds felt that their competencies met with the employer's needs.

The most significant links, both in terms of their regularity and the influence exerted, were in the form of informal contacts. Around two-thirds of HEIs with which respondents had links were in the South East or London. However, the one-third that were not is worth noting, and links stretch as far as Scotland and abroad — perhaps because local HEIs do not cover the specialisms of the respondent organisation.

Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that employers had an important role to play in the definition of course curricula and teaching. Furthermore, respondents were of the opinion that librarianship/engineering degree programmes needed to be more focused on the future competency needs of employers.

Inevitably, on this point, respondents felt the employers had a part to play. However, the responses given indicated a desired dual responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance in courses, shared by employers and HEI staff. Respondents felt that

employers were not always the best people to make judgements about labour market relevance. The responses further indicate that other factors, alongside labour market relevance, should also be considered when assessing the quality of degree programmes.

Part 4:
Conclusions and Considerations

19. Conclusions and Considerations

The English LABMAQUAL research report has sought to address the question of how quality assurance influences the adaptation of higher vocational education to the needs of the labour market.

The conclusions and considerations from the research are presented under four main headings. First is a consideration of the diversity inherent in English higher education (section 19.1). The subsequent two sections deal with the dual, interrelated questions of quality assurance and labour market responsiveness in two time periods. These are up to 2002 (section 19.2), and 2003 and into the future (19.3). Finally, some further considerations are made about the difficulties and possibilities of ensuring labour market responsiveness using the quality assurance system in England (section 19.3).

19.1 Diversity: the context of higher education in England

One factor which has impacted greatly on the findings of this report is the historical legacy of strong institutional independence in higher education in England. It is necessary to consider this aspect if we are to understand the situation of quality assurance in HE, changes that have occurred, and the means by which vocational degree programmes remain responsive to the needs of the labour market.

Historically, universities have had the power to define the content, assessment methods, and skills developed in courses. In addition, they have developed their own internal quality assurance mechanisms — for example in regards to the introduction, validation and review of courses. Furthermore, student choice is the main driver in the allocation of funding to different subject areas in higher education, not assessments made by the government or other body regarding the numbers required for each profession.

In such a context, courses sharing the same name have developed with considerably different curricula, teaching and assessment methods and aims. In parallel, the 'missions', or stated purposes of institutions, vary greatly — something which is welcomed by

the government (see the white paper *The Future of Higher Education*, 2003).

In a context of such complexity, one would perhaps not expect much change to have occurred in the field of higher education. In fact, the sector has undergone considerable change, particularly over the last ten years, in the area of quality assurance. Significant changes over the last year mean that the conclusions need to be presented in two discrete time periods: pre- and post-2003. These two sections will integrate findings from the case studies and the employers survey.

19.2 Quality assurance and labour market responsiveness: Vocational HE up to 2002

The national English quality assurance infrastructure was introduced in the 1990s in the context of mass expansion of higher education, and the perception that, given the increased expenditure, higher education institutions (HEIs) needed to be held accountable for the quality of their provision. National quality assurance responsibilities were brought under one 'umbrella' in 1997, with the introduction of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

19.2.1 Subject reviews

Subject and institutional reviews were at the apex of the quality assurance infrastructure. Institutional reviews examined the quality assurance structures within HEIs, but it was subject reviews that had most impact, perhaps because of the coverage and volume of work involved. From 1994 to 2002, each subject offered at higher education level — both by HEIs and further education colleges — was reviewed. Review teams were made up of subject peers, overseen by a review co-ordinator, who examined a mass of documentation, spoke with staff and students at length, and witnessed teaching sessions.

There is no binary divide between 'academic' and 'vocational' higher education in the England, so the areas covered by the review were, on a superficial level, identical. These were, to summarise: curricula, teaching and assessment, student progression and attainment, support given to students, learning resources and their effective utilisation, and mechanisms for ensuring and enhancing the quality of provision. In other words, there was no single labour market relevance criterion upon which grades were awarded.

However, it is wrong to assert that subject reviews did not address the relevance and responsiveness of vocational courses to the labour market. Because vocational degree programmes had been designed with different intentions, course providers were

asked to give their aims and objectives for the provision in self-evaluation documents. Subjects would then be judged, predominately, on whether they met their stated aims and intentions.[1] As vocational degrees naturally gave the aim of being of relevance to the needs of employers, they were judged against this aim.

This is not necessarily to say that assessments of the vocational relevance of courses, and means by which this was achieved, were always of a consistent magnitude. Indeed, our case study research has unearthed an example: the marketing programme (Chapter 14), in which it was felt that labour market relevance of provision was not sufficiently examined because it was reviewed alongside less-vocational subjects such as economics.

Nevertheless, our case study research and examination of subject review reports from a large number of HEIs indicate a recurring pattern: degree programmes claim their courses to be of relevance to the labour market; subject review teams investigate such claims with reference to the means by which this was said to be achieved. Subject reviews therefore investigated a range of mechanisms by which courses claimed they remained responsive to the needs of the labour market. These mechanisms developed organically, outside of the quality assurance infrastructure. These overlapping factors included:

- **course accreditation** by professional bodies, which places stipulations on the areas to be covered in courses and, in some cases, the necessary involvement of employers in provision
- **validation and revalidation** — the compulsory process by which courses are introduced and reviewed at regular intervals, which should use information from the labour market to make the case for changes to provision
- **employer advisory panels**, which meet with staff at regular intervals to offer advice on changes to curricula and teaching that they would like to see
- **student placements**. Although not compulsory across vocational HE as a whole, student placements with employers are usually available as part of courses. They are deemed important in maintaining the relevance of provision to the needs of the labour market, both directly (students practical learning experience from the placement) and indirectly (by allowing staff to forge links with employers).
- **professional experience**: staff in vocational degree programmes often come from the profession to which the degree is related, thereby bringing experience of working in the field

[1] The QAA Code of Practice, subject benchmark statements, and qualifications framework would also be used as criteria, but only in more recent reviews, as they were introduced comparatively recently.

- **contacts, formal and informal, with employers**. These contacts can be useful for advising on curricula, for example.
- **broader involvement of employers**, for example in teaching
- **research** — can help foster understanding of labour market needs, either because this is the topic of the research, or because it brings academics into contact with employers.

There appears to be some variation between different subject areas, in regard to the mechanisms by which courses attempted to be responsive to labour market needs. For example, industrial advisory boards and accreditation seem more prevalent in more traditional vocational areas (*eg* engineering) compared with newer sectors (*eg* hospitality). Nevertheless, our research discussed in Part 2 indicates that judgements were made about the ability of mechanisms such as those listed above to ensure responsiveness, whether or not these were formalised links with employers.

19.2.2 Other quality assurance mechanisms

Subject reviews were not developed in isolation. In addition, the QAA introduced a code of practice, a qualifications framework, and subject benchmark statements — all of which provide external reference points for the first time (see section 5.7). The code of practice sets out principles for good practice in a (growing) number of areas — for example, placements and careers education. These are not a set of rules, merely principles of good practice against which institutions' policies can be compared. The HE qualifications framework, on the other hand, sets out what should be expected of students at various qualification levels (across all subjects).

Subject benchmark statements are produced by teams of (mainly) academic staff. They state what can realistically be expected in a degree of that title, and what can be expected of students at different levels of progression. The subject benchmark statements are not totally prescriptive, allowing a large degree of flexibility in provision (diversity was not viewed negatively). On the other hand, subject reviews conducted after the introduction of subject benchmark statements were supposed to take these into account in forming judgements. The degree to which subject benchmark statements will have an impact on the labour market relevance of courses is considered in section 19.3.1.

19.2.3 Employer perspectives

A survey of employers of engineers and librarians asked about their links with higher education and their perceptions on the quality of education and graduates (see Part 3). As the survey took place in 2002, their responses relate to the situation when the previous quality assurance infrastructure was in place. The results are likely to be indicative of employers in these sectors with a

greater than average degree of interest, knowledge and involvement in higher education.

Links with HEIs amongst the employers responding were mixed, although the most common form was through informal contacts with staff members. Awareness of courses to which respondents had links, and influence exerted, were also mixed; however, a large minority felt they were neither aware of the curricula or exerted much influence. This may have been because links were used to attract staff. Overall, those who had employed graduates from programmes with which they had links were positive about their subject knowledge, but less so in regard to social, communicative and problem-solving skills.

In general, respondents indicated that they wanted employers to be involved in the designing and delivery of the degree programmes, in partnership with HEI staff.

19.3 Quality Assurance and labour market responsiveness: 2003 and into the future

As explained earlier, subject reviews were a large venture, strongly criticised by many of those working in higher education as being time consuming and bureaucratic. In this context, the decision was taken by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills that the reviewing of subject-level provision would be scaled back dramatically.

Under the new framework, introduced in 2002, institutional audits replaced institutional and subject reviews. To simplify, audits are to examine the effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance structures and mechanisms, and the reliability of the information published by the institution on the quality of its programmes and standards of its awards. Audits are to be conducted on a six-yearly cycle.

The degree of scrutiny at subject level, in what are termed 'audit trails', is predominately limited to testing the effectiveness of the quality assurance mechanisms; in other words, to 'drill down' to the subject level to ensure institution-wide QA procedures are working correctly. This means that audit trails will be less intensive than subject reviews, with less emphasis on judging the overall quality of provision. Full subject reviews will be reserved for situations when audit trails identify significant weaknesses. Audit trails will also only be conducted for a minority of subjects within an institution, representing the equivalent of around ten per cent of full-time students.

The only exception to this rule will relate to HE courses delivered in further education colleges, which will continue to receive subject reviews. However, although FE colleges represents over

ten per cent of students enrolled on HE courses, the majority of these will be below Bachelors level, and therefore are not the focus of this research.

19.3.1 Implications of changes for labour market relevance

It is too early to fully assess the impact the changes will have, in terms of influencing vocational degrees to respond to the needs of the labour market. However, on the basis of available information, and taking the changes as a whole, we can estimate that the consequences are likely to be both negative and positive.

On the negative side, under the subject review system all HE degrees were scrutinised at subject level, with vocational degrees having to justify, at least to some degree, how they remained responsive to employer needs. Now, 90 per cent of provision will not be subject to an audit trail, and courses that are will receive a less intensive examination than they would have done by way of a subject review. Only HE courses delivered by FE colleges will automatically continue with the subject review, but at the Bachelors-degree level this represents only a relatively small minority of BA students.

On a more positive note, the new framework encourages institution-wide quality assurance structures, and tests how they operate. Often, HEIs make claims at the institution level regarding their links with business and the wider local community, and under the old system the consistency of such claims across the institution as a whole may have been overlooked. By focusing on the consistent enactment of procedures across institutions, this may encourage greater and more consistent input from employers into curriculum design, course review and delivery. Such a move could further be enabled by government funding plans designed to incentivise the forging of links between HEIs, business, and the wider community (see section 4.4.3).

It is also worth considering the fact that the external reference points mentioned above may also, given time, have a positive effect. Subject benchmark statements, for example, were introduced too recently to be included in most subject reviews. However, they are updated on a regular basis, and courses will need to justify their provision against these, for example in validation exercises. This may act, to some degree, as a mechanism for ensuring that courses are updated in certain areas of provision, and where they are not, justification will be required. There is also the opportunity for employer involvement in subject benchmarking, although the evidence so far suggests that this involvement has not been considerable.

On balance, however, it is our assessment that the introduction of the new audit framework will probably have more of a negative

than a positive impact. This is because, as already stated, it reduces the scrutiny on subject-level provision. Furthermore, more positive comments made above on subject benchmark statements and institution-wide policies are speculative.

19.4 Further considerations for labour market responsiveness

Clearly, much good work goes on in higher vocational education in England, in regard to maintaining the responsiveness of courses to the needs of the labour market. This was indicated by the case studies.

The broad question for future consideration and research is not, therefore, whether good practice takes place in elements of vocational HE in this area, but how can we *ensure* that vocational HE across the board continues to be responsive to the needs of the labour market?

This is problematic given the situation of HE in England, partly because of:

- the history and reality of institutional independence in English higher education, which makes the imposition of rules and regulations difficult, and arguably, undesirable
- the lack of a binary divide between 'academic' and 'vocational' education, which often blurs the division between the two realms of education
- the focus on student choice as a means for allocating funding for student places and the continuation of courses.

In themselves, these factors are not necessarily bad (although they make transparent quality assurance judgements difficult). Institutional independence leads to a diversity of provision in regard to curricula, and our research suggests that the government and employers view this as a good thing. England has a diverse labour market, particularly as a consequence of the move away from traditional manufacturing to more post-Fordist activities in the service sector. It is also an interesting that about 40 per cent of graduate jobs in the UK are open to graduates from any discipline — a much greater number than in, say, Germany, where there is a closer link between job and qualification. Given these considerations, it is perhaps not surprising that employers in the UK, when surveyed, tend to specify the need for generic skills — social and cognitive abilities, for example. This was replicated in the survey of this report.

These considerations bring us on to another important issue: how to balance the needs of graduates with the needs of employers. This is, in a sense, another way of asking the question 'labour market relevance for whom?' Obviously, it depends on the area of

study, but in general it is true to assert that we have a relatively fluid labour market in England, with people moving between sectors of industry more freely than in other countries of Europe. It follows from this that the needs of the individual, who may move between sectors of industry in employment, must be considered alongside the needs of the employer. This, inevitably, complicates matters when one comes to consider whether the 'needs of the labour market' are being met (this should be considered in future research, as we elaborate below).

The diversity stemming from institutional independence — in terms of curricula, internal quality assurance procedures *etc.* — arguably contributed to the level of work involved in subject reviews, and, ultimately, their downfall in an already over-stretched HE sector. As we have argued, subject reviews did act, albeit imperfectly, as a means of assessing labour the market relevance of vocational courses under a unitary system. However, subject reviews are not, realistically, going to return. So where does that leave quality assurance as a means for ensuring labour market relevance in English vocational HE? How can future research contribute to our understanding?

To summarise what has already been said, the fundamental question arising from this research is:

- How can labour market responsiveness in higher vocational degree programmes be ensured in England, given the relative diversity of provision, institutional independence, and lack of a clear binary divide?

Clearly, this is an extremely complex question, which we cannot hope to answer, if at all, without a great deal of research. In the current situation, we can investigate several areas which should move us *further* towards answering this question, however:

- As mentioned before, the new QAA Audit system may encourage institution-wide policies to involve employers more significantly across their vocational degree programmes. This may further be encouraged by additional government funding for such activities. If institutions do adopt such policies, research could be conducted on the results of such endeavours, with some assessment of their applicability more widely across higher education institutions.
- Another area that could yield interesting research is the subject of professional body course accreditation. As our research has indicated, the importance of accreditation varies between different sectors, although most subjects have some form of accrediting body. As these are well established in higher vocational education, they could be built upon, and encouraged where they are weak, as a means of contributing to the labour market relevance of courses. The research would,

therefore, be a comparative study of the activities of different accreditation bodies, and their impact on degree programmes.

- We have been unable to fully investigate higher education provided by further education colleges in this research, and yet this is an important and growing area for vocational HE. This is particularly the case for higher education below BA level. It would, therefore, be sensible to conduct research on the issues that this report has addressed, but applied to the diversity of HE taught in FE colleges. We suspect that the findings of this research would differ considerably from that presented here, given the clear vocational focus of FE, and closer involvement of employers in provision.
- Finally, it is important that future research considers the labour market relevance of courses *to graduates*. It would be useful to conduct a large-scale survey of graduates with vocational degrees, three to five years into their careers, on the usefulness of their degrees for their employment up to that point. This would further increase our understanding of how people move between jobs and sectors of industry, and whether their degrees remain relevant.

Appendix 1: Additional Tables to Part 3

A1.1 Engineers

Table A1.1a: Whether engineer respondents agree with the statements provided: The economy and higher education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Engineering degree programmes are vital for the national economy	63	32	3	3	100	*112*
Engineering degree programmes are vital for the regional/local economy	47	47	6	0	100	*108*
In future, half of the working population should experience higher education	23	46	31	0	100	*105*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.1b: Whether engineer respondents agree with the statements provided: The labour market relevance of courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Engineering degree teaching staff really understand current competency needs of employers	11	40	25	24	100	*112*
Teaching staff should be more concerned with future competency needs of employers when developing the content of courses	58	39	1	3	100	*111*
It is sufficient that the content of the course is adapted to current, rather than future competencies required by employers	3	30	63	5	100	*111*
The quality of engineering degrees should be an important issue for employers	55	40	3	3	100	*110*
Labour market relevance should be one of the major criteria in the evaluation of degree quality	11	47	34	8	100	*111*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.1c: Whether engineer respondents agree with the statements provided: Responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance in courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Employers should be well informed about the organisation and teaching assessment methods of engineering programmes which are relevant to them	34	51	11	4	100	*112*
Employers only responsibility to engineering education is in the supplying placements, traineeships for students	5	33	59	4	100	*110*
Employers are the best people to make statements about labour market relevance of engineering degrees programmes	21	61	8	10	100	*110*
Employers representatives and professional bodies are the best people to comment on the relevance of engineering degrees programmes	17	65	9	9	100	*111*
The prime responsibility for making sure that engineering degree programmes adapt to the needs of the labour market lies with the degree providing education institutions	26	45	19	9	100	*110*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.1d: Whether engineer respondents agree with the statements provided: The involvement of employers in higher education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Employers should be involved in defining the content of degree courses	28	63	5	4	100	*111*
Employers should provide feedback to higher education institutions on their satisfaction with graduate recruits	56	40	2	3	100	*111*
Employers should be well informed about the content of engineering degree programmes which are relevant for them	50	43	4	3	100	*112*
Employers and teachers should co-operate closely in developing curricula for engineering degree programmes	56	37	4	3	100	*110*
Employers should actively participate in the teaching of engineering/librarianship degree programmes	39	46	9	6	100	*109*

Source: IES Survey 2002

A1.2 Libraries

Table A1.2a: Whether library respondents agree with the statements provided: The economy and higher education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Librarianship degree programmes are vital for the national economy	25	55	14	6	100	*51*
Librarianship degree programmes are vital for the regional/local economy	28	55	17	0	100	*47*
In future, half of the working population should experience higher education	57	32	11	0	100	*44*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.2b: Whether library respondents agree with the statements provided: The labour market relevance of courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Librarianship degree teaching staff really understand current competency needs of employers	12	29	33	25	100	*51*
Teaching staff should be more concerned with future competency needs of employers when developing the content of courses	75	18	—	8	100	*51*
It is sufficient that the content of the course is adapted to current, rather than future, competencies required by employers	2	6	90	2	100	*51*
The quality of librarianship degrees should be an important issue for employers	71	20	4	6	100	*51*
Labour market relevance should be one of the major criteria in the evaluation of degree quality	6	54	32	8	100	*50*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.2c: Whether library respondents agree with the statements provided: Responsibility for ensuring labour market relevance in courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Employers should be well informed about the organisation and teaching assessment methods of librarianship programmes which are relevant to them	43	45	4	8	100	*51*
Employers only responsibility to librarianship education is in the supplying placements, traineeships for students	0	10	82	8	100	*51*
Employers are the best people to make statements about labour market relevance of librarianship degrees programmes	16	61	6	16	100	*49*
Employers representatives and professional bodies are the best people to comment on the relevance of librarianship degrees programmes	14	69	8	10	100	*51*
The prime responsibility for making sure that librarianship degree programmes adapt to the needs of the labour market lies with the degree providing education institutions	20	40	36	4	100	*50*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.2d: Whether library respondents agree with the statements provided: The involvement of employers in higher education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Employers should be involved in defining the content of degree courses	43	47	6	4	100	*51*
Employers should provide feedback to higher education institutions on their satisfaction with graduate recruits	75	22	2	2	100	*51*
Employers should be well informed about the content of librarianship degree programmes which are relevant for them	65	31	2	2	100	*51*
Employers and teachers should co-operate closely in developing curricula for librarianship degree programmes	58	38	2	2	100	*50*
Employers should actively participate in the teaching of engineering/librarianship degree programmes	67	24	2	6	100	*49*

Source: IES Survey 2002

A1.3 Respondents with links

Table A1.3a: Whether respondents with HEI links agree with the statements provided: The economy and Higher Education (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Engineering/librarianship degree programmes are vital for the national economy	62	32	3	3	100	*65*
Engineering/librarianship degree programmes are vital for the regional/local economy	48	47	5	0	100	*62*
In future, half of the working population should experience higher education	19	49	32	0	100	*57*

Source: IES Survey 2002

Table A1.3b: Whether respondents with HEI links agree with the statements provided: The labour market relevance of courses (percentages)

	Agree fully	Agree partially	Do not agree	Don't know	Total	*(n)*
Engineering/Librarianship degree teaching staff really understand current competency needs of employers	14	46	28	12	100	*65*
Teaching staff should be more concerned with future competency needs of employers when developing the content of courses	62	35	2	2	100	*65*
It is sufficient that the content of the course is adapted to current, rather than future, competencies required by employers	3	25	71	2	100	*65*
The quality of engineering degrees should be an important issue for employers	66	32	2		100	*65*
Labour market relevance should be one of the major criteria in the evaluation of degree quality	11	54	32	3	100	*65*

Source: IES Survey 2002

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