

Response to the House of Commons IUSS Committee report, “Students and Universities”

Standards

ASKe welcomes the Committee's recognition *‘that the sector needs to address the question of standards now’* (para 307). And we fully concur with their assertion that *‘as long as there is a classification system it is essential that it should categorise all degrees against a consistent set of standards across all higher education institutions’* (para 256). However, the recommended role for *‘a new quality and standards agency’..... to safeguard the integrity of standards’* (para 307) and HE Academy *‘in promoting and enhancing academic standards’* (para 308) must be mindful of the difficulties associated with this. It cannot be achieved by simply trying to explicitly define in great detail the nature of the standards. In order to make this possible, we would repeat two points from our submission to the Committee (available at <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/IUSSsubmission/>):

1. To establish national standards in any given discipline requires the establishment of a disciplinary community of assessment practice across the sector. This requires bringing together members of the discipline from different institutions to compare the quality of their students’ work and their marking judgements.
2. To establish national standards for a degree across disciplines it is necessary to reopen the discussions of the 90s into the meaning of ‘graduateness’.

‘The development of a national “remit” for external examiners’ (para 273) must not only define the role of external examiners but also ensure that their understanding of standards is rooted and shared within the academic communities from which they are drawn.

We further welcome the recognition by the Committee that there are *‘serious grounds for concern’* (para 260) about both current assessment methodologies and statistical practices, which require serious review. However the quest for reliability must not be achieved at the expense of skewing *‘assessment towards the assessment of simple and unambiguous achievements... ..away from judgements of complex learning’* (Knight, 2002 p. 278¹)

Compacts

We also recognise the good intentions in the recommendation for codes of practice. In particular, we welcome the need to make transparent the nature, type

¹ Knight, P. T. (2002) Summative assessment in higher education: practices in disarray, *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(3), 275–286.

and quality of contact time available to students and clarification of expected study time, including independent study, for students.

We welcome, in principle, the commitment to a compact relating to feedback but have serious concerns about a compact based on mechanistic solutions to complex feedback problems. Mechanistic solutions rarely make a difference to understanding of the nature of feedback which lies at the heart of successful feedback processes and meaningfully engagement. That is, feedback must be understood as a relational process that takes place over time, is dialogic, and is integral to teaching and learning in order to support high level and complex learning. An example of a compact that does deal with feedback understanding is available on this website <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/news.html>

Pedagogic Research and Status of Teaching

We welcome the call for more *'applied research, into key areas that should inform policy formulation'* (para 304). Pedagogic research does throw light on a range of complex and difficult issues facing higher education. It can, and has, asked some awkward questions and revealed some uncomfortable evidence in a sector that claims to use evidence-based decision making. Consequently the recommendation that *'the Research Excellence Framework explicitly recognizes and gives credence to research into pedagogy and the teaching within, and across disciplines'* (para176) is very important.

In addition to the development of the status and importance of pedagogic research, the need for *'a strategy to require all university staff engaged in regular and significant teaching to undertake appropriate training in pedagogic skills'* (para 187) and the requirement on higher education institutions *'to provide a clear audit trail of the use to which resources provided for teaching and research are put so that they are clearly separated and clearly identified'* (para 160) are particularly welcomed as they will make more transparent each institutions' commitment to the student learning experience and greatly enhance the likelihood of significant improvement in that experience.

Plagiarism

We welcome the view that plagiarism should be *'progressively "educated" and "managed" out of the system'* and point out that there are already resources² available that will support this process but it must be recognised that the establishment and sharing of *'standards that set out what is and what is not plagiarism'* will be a difficult and time consuming process.

² Carroll, J. (2007), *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education*, 2nd edition, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University