Subject Benchmark Statements

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Summary of the situation

The QAA Qualifications frameworks are generic specifications of the minimum standards expected of all graduates (and holders of other HE awards). Subject benchmark statements are intended to apply the generic specifications to honours graduates in broad subject areas, and also to articulate 'the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity.'

The function of benchmark statements is to provide:

- an external point of reference for institutions when designing or approving programmes of study;
- a means for external examiners and reviewers to verify and compare standards;
- information for students and employers.

At the time of writing, only 22 statements have been published, and the rest are due in October 2001. All those that are likely to be relevant to our disciplines are already available:

- Philosophy: full text (8pp.); summary
- Theology and Religious Studies: full text (14pp.); summary
- History: full text (12pp.); summary

The History and Philosophy of Science (including the History of Medicine and Technology) has, as usual, been overlooked by the QAA as a distinct subject area. Enquiries by the PRS Subject Centre suggest that the Philosophy of Science community is happy to go along with the Philosophy benchmark statement, whereas the History of Science community is less happy with the History benchmark statement. The PRS Subject Centre is willing to use its good offices (and to provide some funding) to assist in the writing of a separate History of Science benchmark statement.

All the above benchmark statements were written before the publication of the qualifications frameworks. They were produced by members of the subject communities themselves (nominated by the relevant subject associations), under the guidance of a QAA official; and the Philosophy panel in particular went to great lengths to consult
departments at an early stage. The focus is as much on what a good honours graduate can be expected to achieve as on minimum or 'threshold' standards.

As a result, these particular benchmark statements are somewhat less demanding than the qualifications frameworks. Even so, a strict application of the threshold standards may well mean that some students who are now awarded a third-class honours degree might have to be failed in future (in accordance with the qualifications frameworks, the awarding of a pass degree is no longer an option).

**Comments**

1. Inconsistencies between the qualifications frameworks and the benchmark statements mean that the whole area will have to be revisited within the near future (the QAA says that this will happen, but not before July 2003). It would be preferable for the qualifications frameworks to be revised downwards so as to be brought into closer contact with reality; but it is likely that the pressure will be to revise the benchmark statements upwards.

2. The benchmark statements have generally been drawn up with the single-honours student in mind; this is the almost inevitable consequence of their subject-specificity. However, a large proportion of students are registered on joint or combined programmes, or take modules as electives. To give just two examples:

   - there are more students studying philosophy as a component of a named degree at Oxford than anywhere else; yet Oxford is one of the few institutions which do not offer a single-honours philosophy Bachelors degree programme at all;
   - there are only two single-honours history and philosophy of science programmes, both recently instituted.

There are serious problems as to how benchmark statements can usefully be applied to degree programmes involving two or more disparate subjects, let alone to elective modules.

   - first, it is unrealistic to expect a joint-honours student to attain the same standard as a single-honours student in each subject, and adding two sets of lower standards does not make a higher standard (in other words, there is a general problem as to how benchmark statements can balance depth against breadth);
   - second, there may be conflicts between the attributes of graduateness expected by the two disciplines (e.g. a philosopher might be expected to question established wisdom, whereas an engineer might be expected to adhere strictly to professional guidelines. So what is to be expected of a student who combines philosophy with engineering?).

**What departments need to do**

Despite the above reservations, departments need to ensure that all their programme specifications are consistent with the relevant benchmark statement or statements.

**How the PRS Subject Centre can help**

We believe that the task will be made easier if departments do not work in isolation. Although the programme specifications themselves will vary from department to department, the problem of how to apply the benchmarks statements will be largely common to departments in the same subject area. A shared understanding across the subject community of how they are to be applied will be a powerful weapon in dealing with difficult university administrations and external reviewers, since the essential purpose of benchmark statements is to provide calibration across each discipline.

The PRS Subject Centre will encourage discussion through electronic discussion lists and workshops, and it will provide a forum for the publication of examples and other documents. It also has limited sums available for small grants.
Further information

The Higher Education Academy has adopted the implications for departments of the benchmark statements as one of its major research themes. It has set up an area of its website devoted to benchmarking. This site provides links to the following documents:

- Jackson, Norman, "Implications of benchmarking for curriculum design and the assessment of student learning";
- Yorke, Mantz, "Assessment issues arising from the benchmarking statements";
- Jackson, Norman, and Smallwood, Angela, "Subject Benchmarking and Personal Development Planning";
- Dunne, Elizabeth, "Generic learning outcomes in benchmarking statements" (available September 2001).

In addition, the Generic Centre has commissioned a number of studies into the potential influence of benchmark statements on programme specifications. The PRS Subject Centre has been selected as one of the subject centres to undertake this project, and some grants are still available at the time of writing. One such study has already been published, namely on the application of the Geography benchmark statement to the BA (Hons) in Human Geography at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education.

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