

Heads of Educational Development Group

Consultation response to 'A standards framework for teaching and supporting student learning in Higher Education'

October 2005

The organisation

The Heads of Educational Development Group is an independent membership organisation, whose members are drawn from 104 member institutions.

In the context of this consultation, it is worth noting that the far majority of colleagues within HEDG carry responsibility for professional development programmes addressing learning and teaching in HE for their colleagues within the institution. HEDG members share a professional interest in translating higher education policy (national or local) and relevant research or good practice knowledge, into support and inspiration benefiting academic practice. At the same time, members support the development of educational direction and policy locally and sometimes nationally, based on experience of working with academic staff, the development of research and scholarship in academic practice and exchanges with their professional colleagues.

Our response

From discussion and exchange within HEDG a number of comments are drawn which are summarised below. Although there was broad consensus about the response as set out below, it must be noted that HEDG consists of members from a wide range of institutions, and that members often represent a wide range of views.

Whilst this HEDG consultation response is critical of the current proposal, it should be noted that the majority of HEDG members believe in principle in the process of professionalisation, of which the setting of standards is an important part, as key to ensuring both an excellent student learning experience and an improved status of teaching.

We also appreciate the complexity of setting standards for teaching and learning support, and welcome the consultative approach the HE Academy has chosen. HEDG will continue to support the HE Academy, constructively and critically, in the Academy's efforts to set national professional teaching standards.

However, the view of HEDG is that although it may be desirable to bring the long process of consultation to a close sooner rather than later, the proposed standards framework is currently too undefined, and relates too little to –at least common-academic career developments, to be ready for implementation in the HE sector.

Our comments relate to the quality of the standards as proposed, and we also wish to raise questions regarding the effect on the sector of the proposed standards.

Our concerns about the quality of the standards:

1. HEDG members would wish to see more clarity regarding the research base for the standards suggested. Although there is a list of references available in the document, the core model does not seem to relate to these mostly well known sources, nor is it clear – due to a lack of referencing- how the suggested stages are based in the research work listed. We are concerned that we may be building a set of national teaching standards, designed to have considerable impact within the sector, on emerging concepts that are not necessarily based in matured and tested research.

We would particularly welcome reference to research that relates the stages of academic progression to professional development, and subsequently to effects on student learning.

2. We also regret that no visible use is made of (published) expertise from within the sector, in that reference is made to neither the Staff and Educational Development Association, which –along with the ILTHE- has been a continued force for development of thinking on professional development, nor to any of the common or particular staff development practices or related research work undertaken in many of UK Higher Education Institutions.
3. In case of some of the standards, we feel there is a lack of precision in definition. Examples of this are: ‘Scholarly performance’ (paragraph 7.1 stage 1), which does not express a measurable standard. Maybe the definition should read: ‘effective performance underpinned by scholarship’? A further example is: ‘demonstrates a developing awareness’ (paragraph 7.1 stage 1). We wonder what this mean in measurable terms. We believe that the HE Academy and the Heads of Educational Development Groups share the assumption that standards are to be measurable, so as to be able to ensure that these standards are indeed reached throughout the sector. In order for that to be possible, we feel that further clarification and definition of standards are necessary.
4. In thinking about implementation of the standards, we have concerns about the complexity involved in combining all the separate elements of the standards framework, which together should lead to a high standard of learning and teaching activity throughout the sector. The proposed framework consists of a three line table called ‘standards’, five ‘areas of activity’, six bullets points entitled ‘core knowledge’ and six ‘professional values’. There is then a suggestion that the learning outcomes of accredited programmes should be mapped against all these groupings. We are concerned that this complex cross mapping will make it too complicated to assess parity of standards between different programmes across institutions.
We acknowledge that it is important to enable institutions locally to contextualise a national standards frame work, and we would not wish to see over-bureaucratic structures imposed on institutions. Nevertheless we would welcome a clearer line from the HEA about what is actually envisaged.
5. Most importantly, HEDG members find that the definition of development through career stages as set out in the three stages of standards, inaccurately simplifies the diversity of academic career progressions. Academics’ professional development cannot be typified in such a linear and cumulative manner. We feel that the national standards should reflect a more broad and inclusive understanding of stages in the academic career.
Most notably, experienced staff who do not wish to take on educational leadership roles – say, because they concentrate on their research (leadership) - are not recognised in the proposed standards. Their learning (formal or informal) may concern a deepening of their scholarly understanding demonstrated in innovated performance, or equally, a broadening of their teaching and learning support expertise, for instance by introducing new teaching techniques of support mechanisms in their actions. We suggest that the continuing professional development (accredited or not) experienced by these staff should also be included.

Additionally, we are concerned that many learning support staff will feel excluded from reaching all levels of the standards framework, whilst it would be clearly appropriate for many experienced learning support staff *and their students*, to take part in full in the professional development that is linked to the standards framework.

Also, the current first level does not include reference to practical teaching, which for post graduate students, part time and sessional staff, is very much part of a desirable standard. We would wish to see this more explicitly included.

6. In the appendices, the third level of the proposed standards framework is not included in the mapping exercise example, whilst this is the level that causes particular concerns to colleagues. We would recommend that in a further presentation of agreed standards, mapping of the third level is also included.

Our concerns regarding the effect on the sector of the standards proposed

1. Our first concern relates to the role of the HE Academy, which the document identifies as 'It seeks no role as a regulatory body and does not assure or maintain standards.' We realise that this is not a question which the HE Academy may feel able to address, but it may wish to seek public clarification for the sector from UUK and SCoP. If not the HE Academy, then *who* will ensure these standards will indeed become implemented consistently throughout the national HE sector?
2. Connected to this, we note that the proposal remains somewhat vague on expectations on institutions: would a very light touch of implementation, or an achievement of only stage 1, still allow an institution to see its staff in general to be reaching the national professional teaching standards? And what will happen to those institutions that do not implement the standards in their professional development provision, or do not seek accreditation from the HE Academy? In summary: *how* will the sector –supported by the HE Academy- ensure the professional standards will indeed become 'national' and implemented across the sector?

Both matters raised under (1) and (2) –who will ensure implementation and how will parity and adherence be assessed- will ultimately define the success of national professional teaching standards, and it is these questions that will crucially support national implementation.

3. As noted in the consultation document, it is not clear how these standards will relate to those of professional bodies, or to related standards, affecting for instance our HE colleagues in Further Education (FENTO standards). HEDG welcomes the HE Academy's intention to provide clarity on such relations in some detail once appropriate HE standards have been agreed.
4. Finally, we would hope that once the national standards are agreed, and the HE Academy starts the process of accreditation in accordance with the standards, guidance becomes available rapidly, to ensure that those who are responsible for CPD activity in particular, can benefit from cross sector experience.

On behalf of the Heads of Educational Development Group,
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Chair