

## Assessing the quality of higher education

Written submission to the BIS Select Committee, from the London Mathematical Society

This submission relates to mathematics teaching in higher education.

### 1. Summary.

The London Mathematical Society welcomes government recognition of the importance of teaching in higher education. However we have serious

Some might argue that such details can always be sorted out later, and that HEFCE had been working



4. Assessing undergraduate teaching. Current attempts to assess teaching in higher education are in some ways worse than those at school level.

4.1. School 'league tables' based on KS2 texts or on GCSE results have distorted what is taught – and have thereby undermined teachers' freedom to focus on their students' long-term progress. But they are at least based on external, "objective", metrics, which cannot be directly manipulated.

In contrast, undergraduate examinations are internally set; standards are externally monitored, but are supposed to reflect the varying nature of a desirably diverse set of institutions rather than be uniform. So it should be clear that the results, or outcomes (whether marks or degree classifications), cannot be used as a formal measure of quality. Yet many university rankings seek to "assess quality" by including the percentage of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2.1 degrees awarded – with the result that there are now (according to a recent media report) four times as many 1<sup>st</sup> class degrees as there were in 2000. This distortion would seem to be a direct consequence of ill-conceived metrics for "quality assessment", and should indicate dangers of a framework that offers rewards on the basis of outcomes that can be artificially 'tweaked'.

4.2. Exam marks vary from institution to institution; but they are at least based on something tangible: exam papers and scripts can in principle be scrutinised. In contrast, the "student satisfaction" measure from the *National Student Survey* seems to be entirely subjective – and perhaps meaningless. But because it "matters", institutions go to considerable lengths to 'influence' such metrics to their own perceived advantage. (Of course at all stages of a degree course feedback from students is important and useful for reflective improvement of teaching. Its uncritical use as a measure of teaching quality is the issue here.)

4.3. The effect has been

(a) to reduce a serious enterprise (whose reputation HEFCE claims it wishes to "maintain and enhance") to little more than a 'beauty parade', that encourages everyone to concentrate on superficial features,

and at the same time

(b) to undermine the idea of quality based on professionalism and trust.

It has also given rise to a burgeoning bureaucracy – an army of administrators – dedicated to the optimisation of meaningless metrics.

4.4. Such examples should lead BIS and HEFCE to seriously consider the advantages of a TEF which is designed to support and improve the quality of teaching, *without the bureaucratic hubris of pretending to be able to measure outcomes* (except in those cases where there is objective data that can be easily collected without distorting the educational process).

The truth would seem to be that we simply do not have suitable metrics for "assessing the quality of teaching in higher education", and would therefore be wise to analyse matters much more carefully before imposing a "framework" that overreaches itself, with negative consequences.

5. Conclusions.

5.1. Higher education is bound to challenge students academically. In mathematics, there is no escape from the difficulty of the material, from the care needed when presenting it, or from the

effort needed to master it. All students find this uncongenial at first –