

Quality Accreditation: cross-discipline
benchmarking

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Richard Lewis

Immediate Past President of the
International Network of Quality Assurance
Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

Former Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open
University

The sub-title

- Substantial differences exist among the organisation of different disciplines. Can we compare performance between these organisations? Are there any valid common indicators that can be used regardless of these differences?

The question re-phrased

- One way of rephrasing the question is to ask “Is it possible to say that Degree Programme A, say in Physics is “better” than Degree Programme B, say, in Philosophy?”
- Another way is to ask whether one compare the academic success as a graduate of a holder of a degree in physics against the holder of a degree in philosophy.

Average hours a week worked by undergraduates - 1

Subject	Hours per week
Medicine and dentistry	35.9
Veterinary Sc, agriculture etc	33.7
Architecture, building & planning	31.1
Subjects allied to medicine	30.4
Engineering & technology	29.2
Physical sciences	28.0
Law	26.5
Mathematics & comp science	26.0

Average hours a week worked by undergraduates - 2

All subjects	26.0
Education	25.3
Creative arts and design	25.2
Biological sciences	25.0
Linguistics, classics etc	23.2
Historical & philosophical studies	22.5
Social studies	22.0
Business and administrative studies	20.9
Mass communications and documentation	20.3

Medical students work for nearly twice as many hours as a student of mass communications and documentation

Percentages of “good honours degrees” 2005/06 - 1

Veterinary science	75.0
Historical & philosophical studies	72.8
Languages	71.9
Medicine & dentistry	63.6
Creative arts & design	62.4
Physical sciences	62.0
Mathematical sciences	61.7
Biological sciences	61.4
Social studies	60.7
Subjects allied to medicine	59.5

Percentages of “good honours degrees”
2005/06 - 2

Mass communications and documentation	59.9
Engineering & technology	59.2
Law	56.8
Agriculture & related subjects	56.6
Combined	56.1
Architecture, building & planning	54.6
Education	53.8
Computer science	50.8
Business & administrative studies	50.1 ^p

A student of historical and philosophical students is nearly one and a half times as likely to gain a good honours degree than a business student.

There appears to be no relationship between hours worked and class of degree achieved

Relative Rankings is a possibility

Given the “popularity” of subject rankings or league tables it might be possible to say that this is an above average philosophy degree while this is well below average physics degree.

But suffers from all the problems of league tables

Comparisons of Generic Competences

Is there such a thing as “graduateness” – the generic competences that might be expected to possess by all holders of, say, a bachelors degree?

In recent years there has been a considerable growth in the number of countries/regions that have produced subject benchmarks and qualifications frameworks – the latter dealing with generic competences.

Terminological difficulties – learning outcomes v competences

“Tuning makes the distinction between learning outcomes and competences to distinguish the different roles of the most relevant players: academic staff and students/learners. Desired learning outcomes of a process of learning are formulated by the academic staff, preferably involving student representatives in the process, on the basis of input of internal and external stakeholders. Competences are obtained or developed during the process of learning by the student/learner.”

UK QF – Bachelors Degree with Honours 1

Honours degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- i a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline;*
- ii an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;*
- iii conceptual understanding that enables the student:*
 - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and*
 - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;*
- iv an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;*
- v the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (e.g. refereed research articles and/or₁₄ original materials appropriate to the discipline).*

UK QF – Bachelors Degree with Honours 2

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;

b critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;

c communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;

and will have:

d qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:

- the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;*
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts; and*
- the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.*

Tuning distinguishes three types of generic competences:

- Instrumental competences: cognitive abilities, methodological abilities, technological abilities and linguistic abilities;
- Interpersonal competences: individual abilities like social skills (social interaction and co-operation);
- Systemic competences: abilities and skills concerning whole systems (combination of understanding, sensibility and knowledge; prior acquisition of instrumental and interpersonal competences required).

Can Generic Competences provide the basis for Cross-disciplinary Benchmarks?

Possibly, but depends on the way in which students are assessed.

Traditionally generic competences taught and assessed alongside subject specific competences

But is the world changing?

In 2006 US Secretary for Education commissioned a report “A Test for Leadership”

A key finding

employers repeatedly report that many new graduates are ill prepared for work and lack the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills that is needed in the workplace.

Recommendation

HEIs should measure student learning by using quality assessment data from instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which measures the growth of student learning taking place in colleges, and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, which is designed to assess general education outcomes for undergraduates in order to improve the quality of instruction and learning.

Twelve months later

And 12 months later it is reported in the that
“Hundreds of US colleges are using
standardized student-achievement tests,
allowing comparisons between institutions,
while investigating options for creating
more such tests.”

Chronicle of Higher Education (28.09.07)

My thanks for your attention