A strategic proposal for a University Quality Curriculum Pledge

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The issues associated with the University's declining performance in undergraduate admissions have been discussed in a number of reports, the report by the consultants Riley's, the University Admissions Report 2001 entry etc. and a number of areas where improvements could be made have been detected. This note considers issues related to the shape of the curriculum, to modern teaching methods, to the employability agenda and related factors. Overriding all this is the issue of genuine quality of learning. In order to position itself as a high quality modern research led university with a forward looking approach to the educational needs of the 21st Century the University needs to take a fundamental look at what it is trying to do. In this note I propose a mechanism for, hopefully, addressing these issues in a powerful and effective way.

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The quality of learning has been defined by OECD in a way which is not really congruent to the approach of the QAA.

The OECD report[1] defined the quality of an educational provision in terms of three broad criteria:

> access - meaning the measurement of the numbers who start and successfully complete a course of study;
> quality - the success of graduates/diplomates in later life that was instigated by their educational experiences;
> the efficiency of the educational system - its cost-effectiveness.

These definitions are a useful starting point to more practical and observable metrics for monitoring quality and using this information to improve and develop the educational provision. Clearly, the second criterion cannot be measured in a short enough timescale to provide an effective feedback mechanism. The other two criteria, however, can be developed into three broad categories:

> (a) the quality and quantity of resource available in the institution. These are attributes that can be defined and measured in such a way as to provide comparators and thus standards.
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In fact, argument - the ability to marshall knowledge, understanding, critical and rational analysis with confidence to produced a well-founded, structured and incisive position - should be the key educational attainment we wish our students to develop together with the humility and professionalism to accept when a protagonist has the better case. This can only really be achieved in the context of personal dialogue with one's peers and mentors (tutors/supervisors) and the external world.

This is in contrast to the QAA approach which deliberately downgrades the *gold standard* approach of the OECD to quality for political reasons. The QAA emphasis is more on bureaucracy, on meeting the aims one has set for oneself, on keeping students and external examiners happy and delivering a *safe* curriculum. This is mainly driven by the desire to treat all universities in the same way and does not recognise that some are better resourced, attract better students and have much higher academic facilities and staff than others. Under the QAA there is no incentive to innovate or to develop degrees which address the changing needs of society and business in order to gain "excellent" ratings.

It is interesting to note that some Universities are prepared to take a new look at what they are doing and how they are positioning themselves. One particular case is the University of Oxford which has declared that it will provide an opportunity for ALL students in ALL departments to engage in some specific organised activity with a *business and enterprise context* by 2005. This includes postgraduate as well as undergraduate; research as well as taught degrees. This is described in a pledge which is likely to prove extremely attractive to many students, home or international.

Sheffield has some activities of this type available for a small number of students. Most students are unable to take modules from the Management School even if they were permitted to do so by their degree course regulations. Where *enterprise* related activity is offered it is done in individual departments and with a limited audience. Building on the Science Enterprise Challenge, and using the experience and resources of the Careers Service, we should introduce a programme which allows those students who wish to do so to embark on either courses on modern business or to undertake projects - particularly group projects - interacting with external organisations and businesses and with a clear beneficial deliverable in mind.

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There are other areas where some departments' curricula seems to be significantly lacking in modern approaches to student learning. For example, students in some departments are rarely, if ever, allowed to carry out an individual research project in their final year. This seems to be completely at odds with modern approaches to developing students both intellectually and organisationally. There are other departments with a similar attitude. We need to challenge this.

Some departments may say that it is impossible to have research projects at an undergraduate level. I doubt this, what it needs is some *imagination*! It does not have to be expensive, if all 3rd year students are doing a 40 credit research project then there will be less need for providing so many level 3 modules, thus saving staff time which would then be used for supervision. My own experience has been that supervising such projects is a very rewarding process and can greatly strengthen one's own research activities since such projects can be used to investigate novel or risky areas which might not be funded in any other way. I believe that research projects are not only a win-win situation for all concerned but are essential if we are to claim to be engaged in *research-led* teaching with any conviction. As an aside, such projects should be examined by the submission of a dissertation and a *viva voce* examination, this works well and is not costly in time if organised sensibly. It also removes the risk of plagiarism. It drives up the quality of the work, in my opinion, when you compare the standard of dissertations in departments that viva with those that don't. The existence of a viva indicates to the student, also, that the staff are taking it seriously and this encourages a better performance, in my opinion. Furthermore, students tend to be highly motivated by the project - assuming that the topics are interesting - and will perform well, thus helping to produce better marks and thus better classes of degrees. The low number of 1sts and 2-1s in the University is a long term concern and more projects of this nature may help.

Although all departments are supposed to allocate each student to a personal tutor in some there is very little else done in this area. Returning to the OECD approach it is clear that small group academic tutorials, as exemplified by Oxbridge, provide one of the most impressive demonstrations of quality. Students engaging intellectually with leading academics every week is a mechanism that, when done well, is deeply impressive. This is an area where this University can excel if it really put its mind to it. It is important, however, that the academic content of the tutorials is properly organised, it is of little use to just meet up weekly and discuss the weather - I do Aerospace tutorials and this is what happens in many of them - in Computer Science a detailed programme is defined and each week we address a particular issue or the sessions are used for the development of personal skills such as presentations, problem solving and discussion around a specific paper or article. The tutorials become a place where we can challenge our students, support them, keep track of their progress and befriend them in a more meaningful way than elsewhere. We cannot afford to copy the Oxbridge model precisely but if we regard it as a priority we can implement something close to it successfully. One needs to bear in mind that Cambridge is actively investigating setting up several more colleges and expanding their undergraduate numbers substantially. Oxford are likely to be doing something similar. This could cream off some of our best students and we need to offer something better than our current competitors to *maintain* our market presence, let alone improve it.

There will be resistance to developing a strong tutorial system and introducing 3rd year research projects from some quarters. Some will claim that they suffer from serious student overload or staff shortages. We need only look at the department with the largest ADC formula surplus to see that with good organisation and a positive attitude these activities can be highly successful without ruining everyone! Part of our trouble as a University is that we teach too many modules and we need to rationalise these and spend more time in a closer and more meaningful engagement with our students. I realise that in some departments the number of students involved may make it difficult to keep the size of the tutorials to low numbers, my experience is that groups of up to 8 can be managed reasonably well. Where departments feel that this is not feasible perhaps they should re-examine their other teaching activities and prune the curriculum elsewhere.

The University has benefited in the past from a pledge on accommodation - guaranteeing all 1st year students a place in University accommodation. This helped us attract students at a time when other universities were not so well organised. The time is ripe for a new sort of pledge, which will emphasise a quality learning experience and one which is also relevant to the modern world and the development of employability skills. I propose that we declare the following pledge and work towards delivering it in time for the next intake after the current admissions cycle, that is, September 2003.

By agreeing a pledge of this type as University policy and providing support in various ways to those departments which are currently unfamiliar with these types of activities we would be able to move departments forward in a way that a piecemeal approach to curriculum development cannot.

The Sheffield Quality Pledge

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Mike Holcombe, 9/12/01

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