

Information skills and the QAA benchmarking statements

The Information Skills Task Force, as readers of the *Newsletter* will know, has been investigating the need for information skills on the part of graduates and addressing ways of improving current practice. As part of its work, a brief analysis was made earlier in the year (March 2000) of most of the benchmarking statements which were then available to find out how those involved in teaching the subjects viewed the importance of information skills. A shortened version of this article was submitted to the QAA by the SCONUL Advisory Committee on Quality Assurance as part of the overall SCONUL response to the benchmarking exercise.

14 benchmarking statements were analysed (including the 3 subjects from the earlier pilot) to find out whether information skills were required of graduates, and if so how they were described. A match was attempted against the 'Seven pillars' model, but this was not particularly satisfactory since the terminology used was very general and difficult to relate to specific skills. Instead, an attempt was made to identify some evidence of good practice which could be considered in the formulation of the second batch of benchmarking statements which are currently being undertaken.

A brief summary of findings is given below:

- All benchmarking statements make some reference to students needing to obtain information, to use it critically and in some cases to synthesise from their reading.
- Most mention the need for students to have 'intellectual curiosity' and to read widely, although this is not necessarily linked to the acquisition of skills.
- Many statements referring to information skills are very vague (using terms such as research skills, bibliographic skills, ability to use libraries). Most refer to the student progressing from guided reading to independent learning, although the steps involved in achieving this are not made clear.
- References to IT skills are more explicit, relating for example to word processing and the use of online sources of information. However, basic computing skills are frequently referred to in the same sentence as information retrieval skills, which implies that there may be some confusion between the use of technology as a tool and in understanding how to obtain relevant information, which is a quite separate skill.
- Only half of the statements explicitly mention the basic skill of recognising a need for information, and there are also relatively few references to the need to identify ways of addressing an information gap, although this may be implicit in more general comments.
- All of the subjects identify a need for students to be able to locate, retrieve, evaluate and present information, some referring explicitly to the use of primary and secondary sources. A few mention the use of library catalogues, although several mention the internet and electronic sources of information.

- Only 3 of the statements indicate a need for the advanced skill, synthesising and creating new information.

Conclusions and examples of good practice

It is encouraging that the use of information in a critical way appears in all of the statements. However, it is disappointing that there appears to be little explicit indication of the need for students to be able to identify and locate information for themselves. The steps involved are not broken down very clearly, and are often conflated with IT skills (eg. Using the internet/WWW).

However, some of the statements clearly describe the range of information skills required of a graduate, which could be seen as an element of good practice. For example: *(page numbers are given since the statements use a variety of paragraph numbering styles).*

History, p. 3

Students should demonstrate they have “... bibliographic skills; the ability to gather, sift, select, organise and synthesise large quantities of evidence; the ability to formulate appropriate questions and to provide answers to them using valid and relevant evidence and argument.”

Law, p. 2

Students should be able “to identify accurately the issue(s) which require researching; to identify and retrieve up to date legal information, using paper and electronic sources; to use primary and secondary sources relevant to the topic under study.”

English, p. 9

“They will be able to conduct research through self-formulated questions, supported by the gathering of relevant information and materials and organised lines of enquiry resulting in a piece or pieces of work of sustained argument and analytic power.”

Politics and International Relations, p. 5

“Graduates ... will be able to:

- Gather, organize and deploy evidence, data and information from a variety of secondary and some primary sources
- Construct reasoned argument, synthesize relevant information and exercise critical judgement”

Education, p. 8

Graduates will have the ability to “improve their own learning and performance, including the development of study and research skills, information retrieval, a capacity to plan and manage learning, and to reflect on one’s own learning.”

Several mix up information retrieval skills and information technology skills within one statement, for example:

Philosophy, p. 8

Students should develop skills in:

“i) information technology – word-processing, e-mail and WWW,

ii) information search and retrieval, using online computer resources to access bibliographic material”.

Very few indicate that a progression in skill level is required, but Social policy provides one example:

Social policy and administration and social work p. 6

“In terms of skills, progression should also be a keynote. Thus in level one a course should normally develop basic research, information retrieval and study skills. This should enable the students at subsequent levels to strengthen their analytical, interpretative and communication skills; and by graduation, to demonstrate the problem-solving evaluative and reflective skills intrinsic to the discipline and the attributes for self-managed, life-long learning.”

These examples are by no means exhaustive but they do provide a flavour of the language used in the benchmark statements. The complete list of finished statements is at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/benchmarking.htm>

The Information Skills Task Force indicated to the QAA that it would like to see all of the benchmarking statements indicating that graduates are expected to attain a similar range of skills in the context of obtaining and using information, and would be pleased to provide further advice. The SCONUL briefing paper, *Information skills in higher education*, SCONUL, December 1999 was supplied as an appendix. There is clearly a long way to go in identifying what we in the information sector mean by information skills and even further in conveying this to our academic colleagues, but the Task Force is addressing this with some enthusiasm.

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