



Executive Summary

This item will constitute a verbal report on the prototype reviews from those who attended the meeting of the Steering Group on 30 April 2002 supported by précis papers on QAA's new " External Review Process " for Quality Assurance (QA) in HE and the recommendation from a working party on information needs for QA.

The Memorandum of Understanding between DoH and HPC will also be discussed in this context.

The DoH / QAA Steering Group for the prototype reviews currently has on it Prof. Rosemary Klem representing CPSM, Prof. Norma Brook representing the Shadow HPC and Dr. Peter Burley (for both). Dr. Robert Jones is also a member in a different capacity. Prof. Klem's position needs review and since the appointments were made ETC has been established and appointed a Chairman. These membership issues will be discussed by the Steering Group on 30 April and ETC will need to come to a view.



Quality Assurance: Past, Present, Future

Dr Roger Brown, Southampton Institute

AUA Conference, 8 April 2002

"Lord Palmerston, with characteristic levity had once said that only three men in Europe had ever understood (the Schleswig-Holstein question), and of these the Prince Consort was dead, a Danish statesman (unnamed) was in an asylum, and he himself had forgotten it."

(R. W Seton, 1937)

- Say where we currently are on quality assurance
- Make an assessment of the recently announced new quality framework
- Try to offer an explanation about why we are where we are, and offer some thoughts about where we might get to

Whilst the new framework represents a considerable advance on its predecessor, the battle for effective quality arrangements is still very far from won

Why has it taken so long to achieve the measure of agreement which underpins the new framework?

- By "quality assurance" I mean, of course, "external quality assurance". Strictly speaking, only those who design and deliver programmes and assess and accredit student learning are capable of assuring quality. It is for this, amongst many other reasons, that I prefer the term "external evaluation" to "quality assurance"
- The term "quality assurance" to describe external evaluation is misleading, it detracts from the importance of institutional systems. The biggest and most important component of quality assurance, is self-regulation by the institutions themselves, which does of course generally involve external inputs such as external examiners/assessors etc

- External regulation by a dedicated agency (HEQC, QAA) is by no means the only form of external evaluation and regulation that UK institutions are subject to: professional and statutory bodies, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (for diplomas and certificates), the Teacher Training Agency etc;
- It is worth emphasising the difficulties of defining, let alone measuring, quality in the kind of mass or semi-mass system that we now have

Where Are We Now

The Government has approved a 3-part scheme of quality assurance which consists of:

- The new quality assurance process
- The quality "infrastructure"
- Information about quality and standards

The New Quality Assurance Process

"New external review process for higher education"

(QAA 2002, Operational Description)

Purpose

The overall aim is to provide reassurance that English universities and colleges are:

- "Providing higher education, awards and qualifications of both an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard
- Exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner"

(Operational Description, paragraph 14)

Means

- Periodic institutional audits by auditors with

"sufficient understanding of a broad academic field to allow them to take an informed view on matters related to academic quality and standards in the field"

(QAA 2002, Operational Description, paragraph 27)

- Self-evaluation/visit/published report
- Preliminary meeting (9 months before audit visit)
- Briefing visit (5 weeks before the audit visit)

(QAA 2002, Operational Description, paragraph 33 & 37)

Focus

- the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms, in the light of the QAA's Code of Practice, and the way in which the quality of its programmes and the standard of its awards are regularly reviewed and resulting recommendations implemented;

- the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information, including programme specifications, that an institution publishes about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards; and

- a number of examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work at the level of the programme (discipline audit trails) or across the institution as a whole (thematic enquiries). These are expected to represent some 10% of the institution's higher education programmes as measured by student FTEs.

(Operational Description paragraph 17)

Purposes of Discipline Audit Trail

- to provide verification that the institution's mechanisms and structures for the assurance of quality and standards are, in practice, operating in the manner intended and are indeed affording the assurance claimed;

- to provide a window through which an audit can assess aspects of what is actually being achieved by students (academic standards) and the effectiveness of the teaching and other forms of support for student learning (quality standards); and

- to provide one direct way of comparing the claims made by institutions for the information provided about quality and standards, with the experience of students and others who have actually used it

(Operational Description, paragraph 47)

Outcomes

- the level of confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards; and, through direct scrutiny of primary evidence, whether the institution is securing acceptable academic standards and quality; and

- the level of reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that an institution publishes about the quality of its programmes and the standard of its awards. This judgement will take into account the audit team's findings in respect of the quality and standards of the provision it has looked at in the discipline audit trails, augmented, where necessary, by advice from subject specialists.

(Operational Description paragraph 18)

"where they find that institutions are managing quality and standards soundly and effectively, and where the prospects for the future continuation of this appear good."

(QAA, Operational Description, paragraph 20)

"a limited programme of developmental discipline-level engagements"

(QAA, 2002)

The Quality Infrastructure Framework

- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
- The subject benchmark statements
- The Code of Practice covering virtually all aspects of quality assurance

"...are appropriate for the awards, or award elements, by reference to published national subject benchmarks, the national qualifications framework and institutional programme specifications."

(HEFCE, 2002)

Information which should be available in all HEIs

- a. Information on the institutional context
- b. Information on student admission, progression and completion
- c. Information on the HEI's internal procedures for assessing academic quality and standards

Information for Publication

- a. Quantitative Data
- b. Qualitative Data

Criteria by Which the Value of an External Review Framework Might Be Assessed

- Coverage and focus
- The balance between the different aspects of quality assurance (accountability and enhancement);
- Within the accountability aspect, the balance between reliance on external and internal processes;
- Effectiveness; and
- Consistency with other policies for higher education.

(Brown, 1999)

Where Have We Been

- The dual regime of teaching quality assessment and academic audit, subsequently known as "subject review" and "institutional review", introduced in 1992.
- The Dearing proposals for a new quality infrastructure, accompanied by "lighter touch" quality assessment, implemented through the Academic Review framework unveiled by the QAA in late 1999, finalised in the spring of 2000, introduced in Scotland in 2000/2001, and abandoned by the Department in the spring of 2001.

New Scheme Expands Quality Assurance in Three Main Ways

- As compared with QA Mark 1 (though not with QA Mark 2), it embraces academic standards i.e. standards of student achievement;
- Audit teams are now expected to give not merely a retrospective look but also to give a prospective look and to say whether they think institutions' arrangements are likely to remain adequate
- Audit teams will be expected to look much more thoroughly at the quality of the information which institutions produce on quality and standards, including responses to student feedback.

The main focus of the new method is institutional quality assurance arrangements, not student assessment or teaching

“To contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning.”

(Operational Description, paragraph 15)

Effectiveness

- The demands on institutions (often seen as the sector's overriding concern)
- The information to be provided to third parties and indeed the role of third parties generally
- Technical feasibility

“The move to an audit-based process for the external quality assurance of higher education has in large measure been prompted by general recognition in Government and HEFCE, as well as by institutions and their representative bodies, of the need to reduce the burden of accountability on institutions. The single process described in this description will, for many institutions, replace entirely the multiplicity of audit and subject reviews that has been characteristic of the current and previous external quality assurance regimes”

(Operational Description paragraph 65)

Topics to Be Addressed by The Audit Team

- Publicly available information on quality and standards;
- Internal systems for the management of information and their contribution to the effective oversight of quality and standards;
- Internal quality assurance reviews and their outcomes, especially at the level of the discipline and/or programme;
- The experience of students as learners;
- The academic standards expected and achieved by students;
- The use made of the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications;

- The use made of the precepts of the Codes of Practice;
- The use made of subject benchmark statements;
- The development, use and publication of programme specifications;
- The quality assurance of teaching staff, including the criteria for appointment of academic staff and the ways in which teaching effectiveness is appraised, improved and rewarded

(Operational Description paragraph 23).

“There are two areas where audit teams will find it difficult to express a high level of confidence if certain elements are seen to be missing. The first of these is a strong and scrupulous use of fully independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures, and the second is a similar use of independent external participants in internal review at discipline and/or programme level. ”

(Operational Description paragraph 25)

- "...the answer seems likely to depend upon how far, in discharging its duties, the Agency operates a fitness for purpose, as opposed to a fitness of purpose, approach. The former implies that institutions will continue to be the ultimate judges of what they need to do to achieve their missions, including judgements about the quality of the programmes and awards they offer. The latter implies that the Agency itself and those who act on its behalf will exercise those judgements. Both these tendencies are present in the new framework, although there has been over time a shift towards fitness of purpose. It is much too soon to say which will come out on top."

(Brown 2000).

"The new arrangements are about how an institution's internal systems for the management of quality enable it to demonstrate compliance with the various external reference points established by the QAA – benchmarks, code of practice, qualifications framework, programme specifications – and not how they contribute to ensuring that an institution achieves its mission. That will be a much more relevant test of each institution's contribution to national HE policy. I am not sure that institutional mission is mentioned at all in the Operational Description."

(David Parry, personal communication)

We Still Need to Resolve Two Fundamental Questions

- What are the purposes of external quality assurance in higher education?
- Who should control the process?

Two Competing Views on Quality Assurance

- Quality is best protected by self-regulating institutions and that the best reassurance for external stakeholders is provided through periodic independent peer verification
- Quality is best protected if these self-regulating institutions have to compete with one another for student, employer and Funding Council support, with those "customers" guided in their choices by the information represented by the public outcomes of periodic peer assessment of the comparative quality of teaching at subject level.

"[It] represents a major evolutionary step in the external quality assurance of higher education in the UK and brings much closer the possibility of a reliable process in which outside intervention in an institution's activities really is in direct relation to the risk."

(Operational Description paragraph 69)

"Universities are a jewel in the crown of our education service"

(Margaret Hodge, 20 March 2002)

Information which should be available in all HEIs

- a. **Information on the institutional context:**
 - i. The HEI's mission statement.
 - ii. Relevant sections of the HEI's corporate plan.
 - iii. Statement of the HEI's quality assurance policies and processes.
 - iv. The HEI's learning and teaching strategy and periodic reviews of progress.

- b. **Information on student admission, progression and completion:**
 - i. Student qualifications on entry.
 - ii. The range of student entrants classified by age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability and geographical origin as returned to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
 - iii. Student progression and retention data for each year of each course/programme, differentiating between failure and withdrawal
 - iv. Data on student completion.
 - v. Data on qualifications awarded to students.
 - vi. Data on the employment/training outcomes for graduates from the First Destination Survey (FDS).

- c. **Information on the HEI's internal procedures for assuring academic quality and standards:**
 - i. Information on programme approval, monitoring and review:
 - programme specifications
 - a statement of the respective roles, responsibilities and authority of different bodies within the HEI involved in programme approval and review
 - key outcomes of programme approval, and annual monitoring and review processes
 - periodic internal reports of major programme reviews
 - reports of periodic internal reviews by the institution of departments or faculties
 - accreditation and monitoring reports by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies.

 - ii. Information on assessment procedures and outcomes:
 - assessment strategies, processes and procedures
 - the range and nature of student work
 - external examiners' reports, analysis of their findings, and the actions taken in response
 - reports of periodic reviews of the appropriateness of assessment methods used.

 - iii. Information on student satisfaction with their HE experience, covering the views of students on:
 - arrangements for academic and tutorial guidance, support and supervision
 - library services and IT support
 - suitability of accommodation, equipment and facilities for teaching and learning
 - perceptions of the quality of teaching and the range of teaching and learning methods
 - assessment arrangements

- quality of pastoral support.
- iv. Information and evidence available to teams undertaking HEIs' own internal reviews of quality and standards in relation to:
- the effectiveness of teaching and learning, in relation to programme aims and curriculum content as they evolve over time
 - the range of teaching methods used
 - the availability and use of specialist equipment and other resources and materials to support teaching and learning
 - staff access to professional development to improve teaching performance, including peer observation and mentoring programmes
 - the use of external benchmarking and other comparators both at home and overseas
 - the involvement of external peers in the review method, their observations, and the action taken in response.

Information for publication

a. Quantitative data:

- i. HESA data on student entry qualifications (including A-levels, access courses, vocational qualifications, and Scottish Highers).
- ii. Performance indicators and benchmarks published by the higher education funding bodies on progression and successful completion for full-time first degree students (separately for progression after the first year, and for all years of the programme).
- iii. HESA data on class of first degree, by subject area.
- iv. Performance indicators and benchmarks published by the higher education funding bodies on first destinations/employment outcomes for full-time first degree students.

b. Qualitative data:

- i. Summaries of external examiners' reports on each programme.
- ii. A voluntary commentary by the HEI at whole institution level on the findings of external examiners' reports.
- iii. Feedback from recent graduates, disaggregated by institution, collected through a national survey.
- iv. Feedback from current students collected through HEIs' own surveys, undertaken on a more consistent basis than now.
- v. A summary statement of the institution's learning and teaching strategy as presented to the HEFCE under the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund programme
- vi. Summary statements of the results of, and the actions taken in response to, periodic programme and departmental reviews, to be undertaken at intervals of not more than six years.
- vii. Summaries of the HEI's links with relevant employers, how the institution identifies employer needs and opinions, and how those are used to develop the relevance and richness of learning programmes. These should be included as part of learning and teaching strategies (item v. above) and in individual programme specifications.

Source: HEFCE (2002), *Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education, Final Report of the Task Group*, HEFCE 02/15, March Report

- *Opportunities for the team to read documents relating to internal reviews, external examiner's reports, and to see illustrative examples of assessed students' work in the course of the discipline audit trails;*
- *Exploration of the relationship between institutional procedures and their operation at the programme or discipline level, giving special attention to the effectiveness of internal reviews of programmes and awards;*
- *Exploration of the chosen discipline audit trails and/or chosen thematic enquiries, including targeted discussions in relevant departments or similar units;*
- *Exploration of the way in which the institution is assimilating the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and the Code of Practice;*
- *Exploration of aspects of the provision of information to potential students and others;*
- *Discussions between the auditors and staff of the institution about particular aspects of the institution's approach to internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms;*
- *Discussions with staff and students on aspects of the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information published about the quality of relevant programmes and standards of awards, including programme specifications;*
- *Discussions with staff and students about the claims for the programmes and actual achievements of the students. These discussions would involve not only the academic outcomes of the programmes, but also the ways in which students are treated and their opportunities to learn are optimised;*
- *Follow-up discussions with the institution about any matters that had emerged from the audit trails (paragraph 38).*

Source: QAA (2002), *QAA External Review Process for Higher Education in England: Operational Description*, March 2002, QAA 019 03/02