

QUALITY ASSURANCE: INTERNALLY EMBEDDED OR EXTERNALLY CONTROLLED?

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Introduction

This paper is intended as preparation for a workshop on this subject and although the examples are taken from Higher Education in the UK it is planned that the principles outlined and issues raised will be applicable to all levels of education and to all countries.

For all publicly funded education it is increasingly clear that those who use such services, whether they be students of any age, parents or employers, must have confidence that the quality of provision and standards of assessment are subject to processes which can demonstrate fairness and objectivity. In general the literature on quality assurance refers to two key purposes: namely accountability and improvement.

Governments increasingly realise that the future lies in 'Education, Education, Education' for economic development, social stability and personal development and fulfilment. With the increasing awareness of the value of education comes an increasing involvement of Government. No longer are most governments content to leave educational policy and development to the educationalists! Key stakeholders, employers, students, staff and governments must be told what is going on in educational institutions and must be able to observe the impact of extra funding on the achievements of institutions and individuals.

How quality assurance processes are developed and implemented will vary from country to country, level to level and even within one country. For example, in the UK there is a difference of approach between the Higher Education Funding Council's Quality Assurance Agency and those Professional and Statutory Bodies which also assure the quality of some programmes offered by higher education institutions. The trend is towards a lighter external touch providing the institution can demonstrate clear and effective internal quality assurance processes. On the other hand many central and eastern European Countries, including those involved in the European Union Phare Multi-Country Quality Assurance Project, have quality assurance provisions which are still focused on control rather than self-improvement. As Brennan in his report to the European Training Foundation (1998) points out, the concept of the self-governing, self-critical higher education institution developed in western higher education, is given less emphasis in central and eastern European countries. It is perfectly natural in our view to progress from a process involving considerable external control when new institutions are set up, to one of greater self-regulation.

Brennan (1998) lists a wide range of purposes for quality assurance in higher education internationally:

- to ensure accountability of public funds
- to improve the quality of higher education provision
- to inform funding decisions
- to inform students and employers
- to stimulate competitiveness within and between organisations
- to undertake a quality check on new (and sometimes private) institutions
- to assign institutional status
- to support the transfer of authority between the state and institutions
- to assist mobility of students
- to make international comparisons.

Externally imposed assessment

We accept there needs to be some external process of quality assurance that ensures there is peer and public confidence in any educational institution's provision. Institutions will want this themselves; it is a matter of professional pride (and also helpful in marketing strategies) to have some kind of external assessment and comparison with others.

Indeed the OU UK has benefited considerably from the public comparisons of its research and teaching quality. Recently, one national newspaper (not known for its support of the notion of Open and Distance Learning) ranked the OU 10th and 11th out of 98 universities in the UK for its teaching quality, in 1997 and 1998 respectively, using Teaching Quality Assessment results. Such public and objective statements benchmarking the quality of an institution's teaching are extremely helpful, and are one of the main reasons why external review can be of value to institutions as well as to governments.

The OU UK has received excellent grades for the teaching of General Engineering, Music, Sociology, Chemistry, Business Studies and Geography in the Teaching Quality Assessment process (see Mills (1999) for a fuller account). It is important to note that the areas of assessment cover a wide range of aspects of student learning and institutional provision and are not just restricted to direct teaching.

The six areas are:

- Curriculum design, content and organisation
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student progression and achievement
- Academic support, guidance and counselling
- Learning resources
- Quality assurance and enhancement.

In addition external assessment has some benefits for the management of institutions not least in helping to encourage change and development and to stimulate healthy competitiveness between departments within an institution.

However there are considerable negative aspects to external assessment. Until recently (the Quality Assurance Agency of the UK is now introducing a new approach) most institutions have commented that external assessments have been extremely time consuming and demanded the production of huge amounts of paperwork. Indeed one leading university in the UK claims that the time spent in preparing for a departmental teaching quality assessment was the equivalent of producing 50 academic papers!

Perhaps of more concern is whether, in the process of institutional quality assessments and teaching quality assessments, the institution learns anything itself. This may be a particular issue where institutions differ from the norm, for example because they teach mainly at a distance. The recent OU UK Institutional Continuation Audit report (1998) simply reiterated points that the University had made in its critical self-assessment documentation, so in a sense the report of external audit added little to the process; the value to the institution was producing its own critical evaluation of its work.

Brennan, Fredericks and Shah (1997) conducted a review of the impact of quality assurance on institutions for the Quality Assessment Division of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Their survey covered 53 subject groups and 12 institutions. They concluded that 'there is little doubt that quality assessment has had an impact on institutions', and the main conclusions of the study highlight some interesting issues:

- two thirds of the external assessors' recommendations had been acted on, although staff believed that many of the actions would have been taken anyway;
- recommendations were more likely to be acted upon at a departmental than institutional level;
- recommendations which appeared insensitive to context or mission were less likely to be acted upon;
- institutions made little effort to evaluate the impact of changes made as a result of quality assessment and this is extremely difficult to do because of the complexity and pace of change in most institutions.

However, action on the assessors' recommendations was not the only impact of quality assessment, with the process of preparing the self-assessment documentation for the assessment and the raised awareness of institutional internal review being the most valued outcomes.

It is to this internal institutional review process that we now turn and we shall try to demonstrate that it is through internal processes, owned by staff at all levels, that real improvements can be made on a regular and continuing basis.

Internally embedded processes

We believe that internally embedded processes are in the end far more valuable to the institution and its stakeholders than heavy external processes and that if a system of internal review (or self-evaluation or self-study) is endemic in an institution, then external assessment can be infrequent and light in touch. This is the way in which Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the UK is moving.

We will now give some specific examples of how the OU UK is developing 'Internal Review' in the provision of its services to students. The prime purpose of such review is that of self-improvement. The case study we will use is that of the re-organisation of regional Student Services which began in 1996 and is evolving in part through the process of internal review.

OU UK Regional Student Services

When the OU UK decided to reorganise its regional student support services in response to substantial changes to both the external educational environment and its own internal curriculum structure, one of its framework documents was the UK Higher Education Quality Council's (HEQC) guidelines (1995). This established a checklist of the main guidance and learner support activities required across the learning process, identifying key features at each stage.

The new regional Student Services came into being in January 1997, and were organised into two broad areas: Courses and Enrolments and Study Support. These two areas cover ten broad activities: Outreach & Promotions, Course Choice, Career & Vocational Guidance, Enrolment & Fees, Induction & Preparation, Learning Skills Development, Student Progress & Retention, Exceptions & Complaints, Exams & Assessment, and Special Needs. Teams were set up in all regions to handle these activities, though staff in all teams respond and deal with enquiries across Student Services. Links were set up with the Associate Lecturers teaching and supporting students on their courses. In conjunction with the establishment of these teams, a framework of common guidance and counselling baseline services for students was produced, drawing on the HEQC guidelines. This formed the starting point for the student services teams. (Student Services Implementation Group (1996)).

In 1997, the first year of implementation, 3 regions took up the brief of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor responsible for Quality Assurance across the University, to 'design a pilot mechanism or instrument of internal review which aims to assess those aspects of provision which affect the student learning experience at the local level.' (Student Services Internal Review (1998)). The aim was to keep the review instrument short, simple and accessible, building on existing structures and systems rather than attempting to invent new ones. Indeed, the final package designed for common use after the initial pilots was subtitled 'How do we know we are doing a good job without suffering review fatigue'! The core ethos of the activity is the promotion of reflective practice at all levels within the institution.

There are three main features to the internal review:

- **It is regular** – internal review is not a one-off or a special project undertaken only in response to audit or subject assessment visits but is a routine activity which is usually linked to the institutional educational cycle or planning cycle. For example, course teams undertake a review annually, looking at student numbers and pass rates and there is a mid-life review for all courses.
- **It is structured** - review involves asking a number of agreed questions, which are normally set down in a checklist or proforma to provide a framework for the review activity. The questions

usually address a common set of issues: what are we trying to achieve, what activities or services have we provided, what has worked well, what are the weaknesses, what are the gaps, what action are we going to take, what do we need others to do?

- **It involves an ‘outside’ perspective** - bringing in other viewpoints, which help both to prevent complacency and to generate fresh or different ideas, can assist the process of review. The outside perspective for Student Services might come from for example, a colleague in another team, a colleague from another region, students or Associate Lecturers, colleagues from a central Student Services unit or possibly even from the Student Services department of another institution.

The baseline services framework described above then set out a model of review and evaluation:

“Each team will construct an annual cycle for planning and reviewing its activities. The review period for teams may fall at different times of the year so that, for example, the Induction and Preparation Team may review and evaluate in the period between February and Easter (for courses starting in February) and begin its planning cycle at the end of the review period. Most teams are likely to review their activities at the end of the academic year, when continuing students have finished their courses and new students are entering the induction and preparation period.”

The model had three elements:

- discussion of and reflection on the organisation of main activity areas during the year, including proposals for better communications and systems changes in the following year;
- recognition and recording of trends and significant shifts in workloads or in the kinds of enquiries dealt with during the year, in order to advise regional and University policy groups and adjust team planning;
- evaluation of the effectiveness and outcomes of the service provided or analysis of the needs of students. The survey work and data compilation undertaken by the OU’s Institute of Educational Technology, particularly where evidence is collated by region, will inform regional reviews. Teams may from time to time, undertake small scale survey work by setting up and tracking the progress of small groups of students or seeking feedback from a sample of students.

In 1996, alongside the pilot internal review, a review of student services activities was also carried out across all regions.

Following the pilot reviews, a series of report forms, able to be completed electronically, was established. These cover 11 ‘core’ activities, and room for individual regions to add 3 more.

So far the process of internal review has been found to be valuable and a way of systematising continuous review and improvement into the process. Comments from participants in the pilots were: ‘it was hard work but I found it really valuable to record what we do anyway but in a more systematic way’; ‘It enabled me to stand back and take a look at what we are trying to achieve instead of just ploughing on regardless’.

New Challenges

One of the most significant challenges to Quality Assurance processes for the immediate and longer-term future is the increasing use of electronic and computer-based media for the delivery of courses, teaching and advice and counselling. Visible documentation as a basis of assessment is less evident; interaction is more personal and fluid. Nevertheless, it is no less important to review teaching and learning delivered by these means; our view is that direct feedback from students themselves will eventually play a much larger part.

The past 15 years has seen a substantial development in and acceptance of student feedback in all review and evaluation processes. Earlier debates, for example Fage & Mills (1986,1987), indicated an ambivalence concerning the value of student feedback on tutorial performance, and there is still sensitivity around direct student evaluation of individual tutors' performance (although the Open University in East Anglia has introduced a quality card to encourage student comment on tutorial provision). On an institutional basis more generalised feedback has been used since the inception of the UKOU, and is a common feature of many smaller surveys: for example, students with special needs regularly complete questionnaires on their experience of our services; and students who withdraw are systematically sent a questionnaire. Student feedback is a both a substantial feature of internal evaluation processes and part of most external reviews.

Discussion

Participants in the conference workshop are invited to contribute examples from their own institutions of both internal and externally imposed quality assurance processes, and in particular, of new challenges and possible solutions.

In introduction, the authors will describe a pilot project providing on-line educational counselling for students with special needs and will summarise the quality assurance and evaluation issues raised in the context of the paper's title questions.

This project Debenham (1998), undertaken during 1996 and 1997, investigated the effects of providing on-line counselling for students with long-term health problems in a distance learning environment. As a result of an initial feasibility study, and its identification of the importance of personal rapport with a counsellor, a second study researched the affects of introducing informal contact with the counsellor in a closed peer group conference. Both student and counsellor feedback, as well as the use of records, are key evaluation features in this study; this example also raises issues of quality assurance in the context of confidentiality and in the effective use of Email and computer conferencing as a counselling medium.

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