

Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?

The conference response

Introduction

In 2007–08, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (the Higher Education Academy), with the support of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), collaborated in a project with the aim of exploring how higher education institutions (HEIs) in England and Northern Ireland viewed quality assurance (QA), quality enhancement (QE) and the nature of the links between them. A subsidiary aim of the project was to extend collaboration between QAA and the Academy in promoting and supporting quality enhancement. The project team produced a report summarising and reflecting on the views of contacts from a wide range of HEIs.

The report, *Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?* was published in electronic form in June 2008 and was posted on the Higher Education Academy website at www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/york/documents/resources/publications/qualityenhancementandassurance.pdf and made accessible from the QAA and HEFCE websites.

The report formed the basis for a conference held in June 2008 at the East Midland Conference Centre to which staff with an interest in quality matters in HEIs were invited alongside representatives from HE Academy Subject Centres and a number of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). Representatives from the HE sector in Wales and Scotland were also invited.

This note reflects on the discussions that took place at the conference, together with feedback provided by conference participants.



QAA



The Conference

The conference took place on 11 June 2008 and was aimed at HEIs in England and Northern Ireland, for staff with an interest in quality and its enhancement.

The aims of the conference were to :

- present the findings of the joint project exploring current institutional approaches to quality enhancement
- provide a focus for the discussion of approaches to ‘enhancement’ and ‘quality’
- facilitate the sharing of policies and practices in this area
- provide opportunities to develop understandings of the relationships between enhancement, assurance and accountability within the higher education context.

At the conference presentations included an introduction to the headlines of the report and speakers from the project sponsors QAA, HEFCE and the HE Academy. In addition an international perspective was provided by Dr Claus Nygaard from the Copenhagen Business School. Copies of the PowerPoint slides from the presentations are available on the Academy website at www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/quality_assurance_quality_enhancement.

Participants at the conference also spent time in small groups to discuss their views of the report and the issues identified. Each group was provided with a note taker. The record of these discussions, along with comments from the conference feedback, forms the basis for this brief reflective report.

Views about the report and the conference

Feedback on the Conference was largely positive, with some consensus about the value of:

- the opportunity to talk with others in small groups
- the relevance and timeliness of the project
- the opportunity to hear about a different approach (that of the Copenhagen Business School)
- the opportunity to hear views from QAA, HEFCE and the HE Academy at first hand and in the same room

Participants also suggested improvements that they would individually have welcomed but there was little consensus in these suggestions.

Feedback on the report

In discussion, participants gave their views about the project and the resulting report, and while these included widely varying comment, some points of consensus appear to emerge. In general, the group discussions can be seen to have validated the report’s findings.

Participants largely welcomed the report and its approach. The use of quotations in the report from institutional respondents was seen as helpful in illustrating the themes of the report. Participants suggested that by throwing light on activity in other institutions the report gave a helpful context in which

to consider their own institutional approach and practice. The institutional responses and the themes extracted from them were recognisable to participants and in many cases were confirmed by their own experiences.

The participants largely agreed that the questions on which the report was based were seen to be very relevant for their own internal discussion. In this context the report was seen as helpful in providing a stimulus for institutional discussion and thinking about the relationship between enhancement of quality and assurance.

Participants commented favourably on the project as a welcome example of visible collaboration between QAA and the Academy. The support of HEFCE was seen as being significant in signalling both the importance of the project and the 'articulation' of the organisations.

Some participants expressed a view that in-depth case studies would have been helpful. It was pointed out at the time that the project team had not adopted this approach in order to avoid any suggestion that QAA, the Academy or HEFCE had preferred ways of approaching quality enhancement and assurance.

The most significant critical comments made by participants reflected different views and expectations about the project's purpose and scope. Some participants felt that the report uncovered nothing that was not already known, and that it could have been improved by having a different conceptual focus, or indeed that a study of this kind was not required.

There was some suggestion that the inclusion of a wider range of respondents, such as staff teaching at a departmental level and representatives of Subject Centres and CETLs, would have been valuable, and that the restricted range of respondents contributing to the project limited its value. The project team accept this perspective and indeed had acknowledged the limitations in the project report itself.

Two particular areas where this limitation had an effect, identified in the report, were also reflected clearly in discussion.

The limited references to TQEF by institutional respondents was to a degree perceived to be an artefact of the methodology, but could also be the result of the way in which TQEF funds were incorporated into the block grant by many institutions. Participants felt that a different set of institutional respondents might have produced a much stronger response about the place of TQEF in enhancement. Nonetheless there was recognition that in an ideally joined-up approach one might expect that a full range of institutional staff, and not merely those most intimately concerned with it, would readily acknowledge TQEF as an important aspect of enhancement.

A similar position was raised in relation to Subject Centres, which, as the report notes, were referred to less frequently by respondents than might be expected. The view here was that a study which took into account the views of, say, teaching staff, would be likely to produce a much clearer picture of the contribution of Subject Centres. This may very well be true, and it raises the question to what extent should central institutional staff with a remit associated with quality (such as those forming the majority of respondents in this study) should be expected to know about the work and activities which take place at the front line of learning. This question, reflecting the balance between enhancement located at a local or a systemic level, remains a very live issue in discussions about enhancement of teaching.

Main points arising in discussion

Some points of interest featured in several discussions. There was considerable discussion about enhancement as a feature of institutional culture which is difficult to define and easily damaged by insensitive approaches.

The report highlighted potential tensions between the ways in which enhancement can be understood by different stakeholders, and these were reflected in discussions at the conference, particularly with respect to the problems of language. Participants generally confirmed that the language and approach of 'quality assurance' does not resonate positively with colleagues primarily engaged in teaching and enhancement. Discussions in the small groups confirmed that within and across institutions there are challenging communication problems in defining, talking about, encouraging and monitoring 'enhancement'.

The challenge of defining or agreeing the scope of enhancement was confirmed as a live topic for institutions. In some cases, participants confirmed that their institution sought the widest possible scope for institutional enhancement of the 'student experience' – a term widely used even while acknowledging its artificiality. For others the institution's central focus was on enhancement of elements supporting students' learning, while expecting enhancement of teaching to be led at a local level. For others, the enhancement of teaching itself was the principal focus of institutional quality enhancement effort.

Institutional participants in the small groups also made very apparent the concern of their institutions that their own approach to quality enhancement should not be judged negatively in institutional audit. Many participants expressed approval of the project as an opportunity to confirm that the institutional audit process did not have a prescriptive model of quality enhancement.

Discussion in many groups touched on the challenges of evaluating the effects of enhancement. The discussions indicated that there is a need to consider further the appropriate measurements on which to base evaluation, whilst the concept of measurement itself was also raised as problematic in relation to enhancement.

One other area in which participants also recognised the desirability of further thought was the definition, sharing and dissemination of 'good practice'. Discussions in several groups confirmed the report's conclusion that questions in this area remain unresolved and problematic in many ways, for example in agreeing what constitutes 'good practice' and how it is defined. The difficulty of effectively sharing good practice (however defined) was noted in discussion.

Comments on further actions

Participants were invited to consider how the work of the project could be taken further.

Suggestions were made regarding how the joint project report and its question template could be used in institutional settings to help institutions think through their developing approach to enhancement. Several participants said that they would be using the report in this way in their own institution.

Participants also made suggestions about how the study could be extended to other groups, including academic teaching staff, students, employers, Subject Centres and CETLs. There would also be interest in work to extend the understanding within the sector of different concepts of good and effective practice and how it can be shared and disseminated.