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The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and subject review: the viewpoint of the assessor

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Abstract:

The programme of Subject Reviews commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and organised by QAA in 2000/01, is reviewed in this paper. The Subject Review process, which sought to assess the quality of higher education in England and Northern Ireland in individual subject disciplines, is explained, and evaluated critically from the viewpoint of a subject reviewer. The pros and cons of the approach as a mechanism for ensuring quality are discussed, based on the experiences of the author. Finally, the extent to which such reviews are of long-term benefit is considered.

Introduction

From 1994 onwards there has been a comprehensive programme of external peer review, encompassing all major subject areas in all higher education institutions in England, completed in December 2001 (QAA, 2002). QAA had responsibility for assessing the quality of higher education (HE) in England and Northern Ireland, under the terms of a contract with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (QAA, 2000). Differing arrangements were made for Wales and Scotland, with partial amendment/adoption of the varying English models being employed at various times within this period, which are beyond the scope of this paper to review in detail.

However, the purpose of this paper, is to offer a critical evaluation of the Subject Review process, in relation to England and Northern Ireland, to December 2001, from the perspective of an assessor. Therefore, this is a personal assessment of the process, based on the author's experiences of subject review during 2000 and 2001, and does not represent the views of QAA.

Personal experience

Following successful completion of training in October 2000, the author participated in four reviews in the period until December 2001, in two subject areas, namely:

- Librarianship and Information Management (three reviews)
- Business and Management (one review)

The HE sector in England and Northern Ireland is diverse, and during the review period, HEFCE funded HE provision in over 140 institutions of HE and in 75 further education colleges (FE). The reviewer undertook reviews in a range of differing HE institutions, viz:

- Pre- 1992 university (Russell Group)
- Post-1992 university (two)
- HE provision by FE.

Subject Review Process

The methods and procedures for carrying out the subject reviews in England and Northern Ireland were set out in the Subject Review Handbook (QAA , 2000), popularly known as the 'reviewer's bible'.

Briefly, the purposes of this process were to:

- ensure that the education provided by HE and supported by public funds was of an 'acceptable quality' (QAA, 2000)
- produce reports of the review process which would provide publicly available information on HE provision
- provide information and guidance to encourage improvements in education

The subject review process evaluated provision in relation to aims and objectives set by the provider, rather than in relation to any externally preset targets, benchmarks or standards. These were set out in a document, known as the Self-Assessment Document (SAD), which was a critical evaluation by the institution of its subject provision, in relation to its aims and objectives. Thus, comparisons between the varying subject providers, based on the outcome of this process, are difficult to achieve, as providers may have aims and objectives that differ significantly.

Subject provision by individual institutions was reviewed by examining the breadth of teaching and learning activities, which had an impact on the learning experience and achievements of students. Such activities were categorised into a set of six aspects of provision, namely:

- Curriculum design, content and organisation (CDCO)
- Teaching, learning and assessment (TLA)
- Student progression and achievement (SPA)
- Student support and guidance (SSG)
- Learning resources (LR)
- Quality management and enhancement (QME)

At the end of the review, each of these six aspects was graded on a four-point scale (1-4), in ascending order of merit, with an overall summative judgement made at the end of the review process. Each aspect had equal weight, and a final profile was constructed for each provider. Subject provision was deemed 'quality approved' if all aspects had grade 2 or higher. If providers achieved 3 or more Grade 2s in their profile, an improvement plan was requested by QAA; any provision which achieved one or more Grade 1s was recorded as 'quality not approved' and required to undertake a further review within a year.

None of the reviews undertaken by the author were either recorded as quality not approved, nor required to produce an improvement plan. However, there were one or two difficulties relating to the interpretation by institutions of these grades. A constant theme of QAA training, was that a grade 4 was not a 'perfect' score. Similarly, grades should not be added together to give an overall score for the provision. However, in practice, institutions appeared to view '4' as a perfect score. Such a view was misleading; in the Handbook it is stated:

This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives.
The aims set by the provider are met.(QAA, 2000, 47)

Thus, the award of a '4' did not indicate little room for improvement, rather that the aims and objectives were met. In each instance of the award of a Grade 4, all the teams indicated areas where improvements might be made. Similarly, most institutions visited, appeared to sum the grades, and were seemingly pleased or displeased, according to the total. As future funding was reliant upon the total achieved, it is perhaps not surprising that institutions behaved in this way. However, it was an additional burden upon the teams, attempting to ignore this situation, whilst simultaneously, attempting to award a fair and accurate grade for each aspect.

Peer review

This was a peer review process, with the reviewers selected from academic and professional peers in the subject field. They were guided in their deliberations by a Chair, appointed by QAA, who normally had a background in a differing discipline to that of the subject under review. The role of the Chair was to lead the team, to co-ordinate and manage the review visit, and to ensure that visits were conducted within the guidelines set out by QAA. Normally, teams were led by one chair; where provision was exceptionally large or complex, two or more could be appointed. Librarianship and Information Management review teams all had a single Chair.

In my view, it was impossible to underestimate the role of the Chair in ensuring that the visit was completed successfully. The quality of their advice and guidance were of vital importance in achieving a fair result, based upon the evidence available. Similarly, their help in ensuring that teams made the most profitable use of their time, again, was fundamental to the success of the process.

The review method was a combination of internal and external review processes, namely the preparation by the provider of the SAD, together with a three-day visit by a review team. The numbers of reviewers in a team varied according to the extent of the provision, but normally there were no fewer than three.

Training

Reviewers were required to complete a training programme successfully. The training replicated a visit, including advance preparation, together with the meetings, documentary analysis, and report writing required on an actual visit. The responsibilities of the reviewers were set out in the Handbook (QAA 2000), with normally, a minimum of two, and a maximum of four review visits required.

The training had some useful features, notably training alongside academics from a variety of disciplines, not merely from the reviewer's own subject field. Thus, early in the process, the key requirement of being able to work with and understand people from a variety of differing backgrounds was reinforced. Review was essentially a team effort, and the training emphasised the importance of teamwork rather than individual effort. For some academics, the process of open and free sharing of information was a difficult one to grasp. However, unless such exchanges took place, the process of review was doomed to fail. Therefore, the training was an evaluative and judgemental process; one had to pass the training programme to be able to undertake subject review. As preparation for a visit, training gave an indication of the work involved. However, as with training and combat, the visits were more arduous than anticipated from the training experience!

Subject review visit

Before each visit, reviewers were sent the SAD, together with any other appropriate advance documentation such as external examiners' reports, and the reports of professional and statutory bodies (PSBs). Reviewers were contacted by the Review Chair, and assumed responsibility for co-ordinating and sharing evidence for one or more aspects. Each reviewer prepared a brief written commentary on their aspect/s which were then circulated for comment at the initial team meeting. Although required to focus on one or more aspects in detail, nonetheless, it was expected that all the team would familiarise themselves with all the evidence for every aspect.

Review visits were normally of three and a half days duration. The teams were located in a base room, which held all relevant documentation and facilities for the team. Daily meetings were held, where evidence was shared, queries raised and ideas tested. During the review visits, the team would examine course/institutional documentation and a sample of student work from all programmes of study, observe teaching, hold meetings with staff, employers, and students (both current and former), and would inspect physically, learning resources. Written summaries were prepared of all meetings, teaching observations, and the examination of student work; aspect reports were updated continually.

On the final day of the visit, reviewers would prepare their draft summaries and meet as a team to review the evidence and decide the grades for each aspect of provision. Once decisions had been made, the results would be delivered to the subject provider orally, in the final feedback meeting. The reviewers would then depart.

The process had certain similarities to those of a rigorous qualitative research process, namely documentary analysis, analysis and identification of themes in the data, with interpretations being checked and rechecked for validity against the data set. No interpretations were valid if they were based on data from a single source; data were therefore triangulated to ensure rigour and validity. Thus, the views and grades outlined in the report were firmly grounded in the data. At team meetings, for example, reviewers were required to cite the sources of their evidence in support of their assertions; any view that was not supported by reference to at least two differing evidence bases, was disallowed.

However, given the time allocated, and the quantity of evidence to be reviewed in situ, the reality was that very tired people were making crucial judgements and decisions that would have an impact upon institutions for some considerable period. In my experience, a typically full day of review would begin with a meeting at 8.30am of the team in the base room, with meetings, teaching observations, and so forth, taking place throughout the day; meetings being held over the lunch period on most days. The day might end officially at 8.30pm, although on one or two visits, days concluded at 10pm. The team would then retire to have dinner, and there would be at least two or more hours of work to complete, reviewing evidence and reading student work.

Report

Drafts of the various aspect reports were produced during the visit. Following the visit, the review Chair organised the final draft of the report, normally produced within one week of completion of the visit, which was then sent to QAA, and thereafter to the host institution for their comments. However, the subject provider could not query the report, except with regard to factual accuracy; institutions were not allowed to object to the report merely on the grounds of disagreement with the verdict. Once the draft was approved, the final report was then published by QAA and made publicly available, either in hard copy or via the website.

Reports had to be written in a certain style, known as 'QAAhili', with each section normally no longer than c. 300 words. Thus, the final report was, in a sense a highly summarised account of all the information collected, analysed and synthesised by the review team. It is regrettable that so much information of potential value to institutions was lost to them, due to this requirement for brevity. Arguably, a more useful approach may have been to produce a full report, together with a separate summary.

Conclusion

As a process, Subject Review had several drawbacks, not least of which was the cost to the participating institutions, and to HEFCE itself. Nonetheless, approached in the right spirit, it enabled a limited sharing of best practice, and compelled institutions to review their approach to the provision of a suitable learning environment for their students. It could be argued that this was an unnecessarily cumbersome process, and of questionable long-term benefit. Nonetheless, as a result of the lessons learnt from this exercise, the quality of HE provision at the individual subject level is deemed by Government to be of an acceptable standard - 'quality is approved'. Such a view is reinforced by the proposals for the future review of HE in England, Northern Ireland, and possibly Wales, which are based upon review at the Institutional, rather than the subject level – a 'lighter touch' process (QAA, 2002).

References

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