

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Paper to the Assembly Review on Quality Assurance

Introduction

As members will know I am a relatively recent appointee in Wales. So why is it that I am here to speak on behalf of HEW today? I have over twenty years of experience in quality assurance in higher education on national bodies. Throughout the 1980s I was a member of various committees of the CNAA. During the 1990s I was a member of the Quality Assessment Committee of Higher Education Funding Council for England, a member of various working parties on Quality for the Further Education Funding Council and the CVCP, Chairman of the QAA's Advisory Working Party on Modular and Multidisciplinary degrees, and also trained as an Institutional Auditor with the QAA.

This experience has taught me two important lessons. Firstly, although quality assurance is important in the context of universities accountability for the money they raise from government and, although the inevitable league tables based on quality assurance audits and reviews are of interest to many people, the fundamental objective of quality assurance relates to the academic experience of our students and a commonality of standards in the awards given by our universities. This, in turn, informs and gives confidence to employers of graduates and to society at large. Secondly, it has impressed on me not only the need in the review of standards at our universities, the importance of an element of externality in the conduct of QA processes but the necessity of disseminating good practice across the university sector for the benefit of all.

Quality Background

Inspection and assessment of universities is a relatively recent innovation. Although, under the University Grants Committee in the 1960s quinquennial review took place relating to funding allocations, those were hardly inspections. In the polytechnic sector HMIs were attached to institutions until the early 1990s when, after incorporation, polytechnics achieved university status through the 1992 Education Act. Throughout the 1980s polytechnics had awarded degrees of the CNAA and underwent scrutiny by subject specialist panels to validate and, therefore, permit the degrees being taught and awarded. During this period the polytechnics strove for full delegated authority from CNAA which would allow them similar flexibility and academic authority to that enjoyed by universities. The distinguishing feature of a British university is that through Charter or Act of Parliament it is an award granting body and as such is both autonomous and independent. The academic freedom of the individual universities is

jealously guarded as a fundamental right of the British system in a manner which is different from countries in Western Europe. Unlike in France, for example, there is no political or central control of the university curriculum.

Nevertheless, in the 1990s it was recognised that universities in accepting public funds should be accountable to the taxpayer and the Government for their conduct. Two quality systems were devised. The first was the HEQC which had responsibility for Institutional Reviews of Quality. The second was the Quality Assessment Committees of the Funding Councils in England, Scotland and Wales which had responsibility for the Review of Subject Quality. At first, reviews of subjects in institutions were graded as, Excellent, Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. In England this was subsequently changed to a numerical scoring system. In Wales it was not. The Welsh system continued with the literal descriptors although an ingenious colour profiling system was introduced to accompany these descriptors. A decision was subsequently taken by the Funding Councils and by the CVCP, which funded HEQC, to bring the two functions of review, institutional and subject, together. A free standing agency, the QAA, was created which contracted with the Funding Councils to undertake the assurance of quality in universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The statutory responsibility, however, for assuring the quality of provision lies not with the QAA but the individual Funding Councils. They contract with the QAA for it to discharge the function on their behalf.

When the QAA took over responsibility for institutional and subject review, all the subject reviews over a quinquennial cycle in Wales had already been completed by the Quality Assessment Committee of the Welsh Funding Council, according to the literal method - Excellent, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory. Consequently, a difference has emerged between the English system – which is a numerical system in which six generic elements for each subject were considered and marked out of four, giving a possible maximum total of 24 points, and the system in Wales which is based upon the three descriptions. Whilst institutional review has been consistently supported by traditional universities in England and Wales, subject review has been more controversial. Over the last few months some of the traditional English universities, together with the Higher Education Funding Council for England, have reacted against the details of proposals from the QAA for a ‘lighter touch’ approach subject review which the DfEE has required it to introduce. The argument in a nutshell is that any university subject which during the last round of subject review, – on the English marking scale - , did not receive a mark of below three on the score sheet, should not have to have a further review, although some sampling should take place. This, it is estimated, will reduce the burden of subject review by 40%. The debate over these issues is complex and continues.

We have to remember that in Wales we do not have numerical scoring and, therefore, there may be a need to find a means to equate the Wales descriptions to the England marking scale.

At a UK level there is currently debate between the QAA and their commissioning Funding Councils as to how this 'lighter touch' is to be achieved. Mr Blunkett has required a reduction of 40% in the burden currently borne by universities. It has been suggested that this be achieved by sampling. But in Wales, where we have only 13 HEIs, all but one of which are relatively small, such sampling is unlikely to work – particularly where subjects (and there are a number of them) are only taught in one HEI. So there is urgent discussion afoot to seek a radical solution which reduces the burden upon HEIs, meets the needs of the Funding Councils (and above them, the DfEE / NAFW and Scottish Parliament) for objective assessment; and accommodates the needs of Wales, England and Scotland.

We have to remember also that the statutory responsibility for quality and standards in the universities and colleges of higher education in Wales resides with HEFCW, which presently contracts the function to QAA. The HEFCW Quality Assurance Committee has considered that the process of review could differ in Wales from England especially in the amount of sampling which might take place.

The Wales Perspective

The universities and higher education colleges in Wales are working hard with the Funding Council and the QAA to find a way forward for the development of a cost effective, socially inclusive higher education provision which is driven by quality in research and teaching and which constructively interacts with business and the community. This must include Welsh medium provision within the region.

Higher Education Wales in general finds that, as part of a United Kingdom sector of university and higher education college provision, it gains credibility in the international and national market place and in the higher education league tables. Consequently, the policy of HEW has consistently been and presently remains one which is UK-wide. There are, however, serious questions which need to be considered within this context.

1. To what extent can the new system devised and promoted by HEFCE for subject review be mapped onto the Welsh institutions? Does 'Excellent' in the Welsh system equate exactly with the numerical system in England? Clearly it does not.
2. Is sampling a viable option in Wales? Operationally, will it prove as expensive and bureaucratic, or even more so, than the present system in England? Indeed, can it work in a small system?
3. What is the relationship in terms of the authority for standards and quality between the Academic Board of the University of Wales and the various Academic Boards of the independent institutions that make up the University.
4. What, therefore, is the relationship to be between the QAA and the University of Wales Academic Board and the QAA and the individual institutions? There is clearly a difference between the University of Wales organisational and academic structure and

that of the University of Glamorgan, which is more in line with the post-1992 structures in England.

5. Should it be argued that in a revised, all-embracing University of Wales system (inclusive of the University of Glamorgan), the Funding Council could devolve the responsibility for the monitoring, assessment and assurance of subject provision at the individual colleges solely to the QAA, or to the University of Wales, or to a joint body made up of the QAA and the University of Wales?
6. If the University of Wales were given funding or in part the responsibility in Wales for the quality assurance of the independent HEIs and their Senates or Academic Boards, to which body would the University of Wales be accountable: the QAA; the Funding Council for Wales; the National Assembly? Clearly the QAA is contractually accountable to the Funding Councils.
7. To what extent in the future does the regionalisation policy in Europe and in particular the Bologna Declaration on a common higher education framework which is supported by the present Government, ask questions of the QAA, HEFCW, the universities and institutions of higher education in Wales and the National Assembly, about European-wide benchmarking and quality assurance systems?
8. Should university accreditation models as found for example in North America or in some European countries be investigated further as examples for an enhanced system of quality assurance in Wales? In this regard should higher education institutions in Wales be benchmarking themselves not only against the UK but more specifically against equivalent partners in the European Community.

HEW recognises the complexity of the debate being undertaken in the UK concerning the role and future of the QAA. HEW recognises and supports the importance and credibility of a UK-wide system of quality assurance. HEW maintains a position by which its independent universities and higher education institutions have the responsibility for their own quality control which must be audited. HEW supports the QAA, though wishes to enter into a dialogue with the Agency and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales which takes into account the different structure of higher education in Wales and particularly the concept of a national university with regional clusters which respects the independence, culture and traditions of their various institutions. HEW thereby wishes to work with the QAA and the Funding Council to find a means whereby it can map the distinctive nature of the Welsh higher education concept with the solutions being sought in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

HEW thereby wishes for a parity of treatment in discussions to help forge a quality assurance system which is clearly transparent, which is demonstrably accountable for the effective use of public funding, which respects traditional academic freedom and autonomy, which reduces bureaucracy, which encompasses elements of enhancement as well as assurance and which respects the national identity of Wales, its universities and institutions of higher education within the legal framework established by the devolution of authority to the National Assembly of Wales.

Professor Michael Scott

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