

Aston University Quality Assurance & Quality Enhancement Review

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Introduction

The aim of the review was to undertake an in-depth analysis of Aston University's quality assurance and quality enhancement policies and procedures. In order to achieve this aim a methodological approach following qualitative research techniques was adopted. The review took place in the academic year 2007/ 2008 commencing in November 2007 and concluding at the end of February 2008. This report provides a summary of the review findings. Several recommendations, each of which are grounded in the review findings, are made.

Methodology

The review commenced with a brief literature review focusing on quality in higher education. Following this a content analysis of QSC meetings over the previous 24 months was undertaken. This was followed by unstructured interviews with 4 members of staff all of whom are involved with various aspects of quality assurance. This preliminary part of the review (groundwork) shaped and guided the fieldwork part of the review.

The main part of the review comprised two distinctive stages. The first of these was in-depth qualitative interviews with 5 senior members of staff all of whom are currently serving, or have served in the recent past, on the QSC and its associated committees. Semi-structured interview guides were formulated utilising knowledge gained during the groundwork stages of the review. The interviews were recorded contemporaneously and transcriptions made at a later stage. Following the interviews, four Focus Groups were conducted with 43 members of staff from across the University.

Four main issues were addressed by the Focus Groups: Annual Monitoring: Programme Approval: Internal Review: University Regulations. The make-up of the Focus Groups was as follows:

1. **Annual Monitoring** (14 FG members. 10 academic and 4 academic support staff from each School including one managerial level participant).
2. **Programme Approval** (12 FG members. 9 academic and 3 academic support staff from each School including three managerial level participants).

3. **Internal Review** (11 FG members. 8 academic and 3 academic support staff from each School including two managerial level participants).
4. **University Regulations.** (6 FG members. 4 academic and 2 academic support staff from each School – no managerial level participants).

The Focus Group proceedings were tape recorded and transcribed. A qualitative analysis of all the research data was undertaken using grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1968).

Literature Review: Quality in Higher Education

The importance of quality control mechanisms within UK HEIs is reflected in the literature which suggests that clearly defined and effective 'quality focused' strategic policies are necessary to raise standards within higher education (Long et al: 2000, Hedley et al: 2002, Gosling et al: 2005). Whilst the need for quality control seems to be a universally accepted 'given' across higher education, the success of stringent quality measures and strategies in raising standards is subject to much cynicism and reflected in doubts about validity and relevance of quality management strategies (McElwee & Pennington: 1993, Yorke: 2000, Koch: 2003, Srikanthan & Dalrymple: 2003). Moreover, attempts to increase students participation in the evaluation of quality within individual HEIs have either been met with pedagogical cynicism (Wiklund & Wiklund: 1999) or viewed as invalid or inaccurate (Barnet: 1996). Despite such limitations, various models of quality control incorporating student and other stakeholder participation have been introduced across the sector. Such models include Total Quality Management (TQM), SERVQUAL as well as other European and Japanese quality management strategies.

The literature suggests that whilst there is a clear need for the development and implementation of quality management strategies throughout UK higher education, there is a lack of uniformity and agreement in respect of the form that such strategies should take. Moreover, the successful application of business rooted strategies such as TQM and SERVQUAL to higher education is somewhat limited (Hahn & Bart: 2003; Galloway, 1998; Wiklund & Wiklund, 1999). It would therefore appear that there is a need to develop a 'purpose-built' quality management and control strategy or model for use specifically within higher education. With Aston University such a model would need to take account of the distinct nature of institution whilst acknowledging and incorporating the impact of the continuing globalisation of

education (Teichler: 2003). It would also need to address the expectation of continued innovation across the sector (Eldridge & Wilson: 2003, Weil: 2003, Kitaogawa: 2004) whilst taking account of demands and requirements of government policy, students, employers and other stakeholders (Teichler: 2000, Tucker et al: 2000, Sleezer et al: 2004).

QSC Review: Main Issues Raised & Recommendations

1. Annual Monitoring

Annual Monitoring represented the most detailed part of the review. The main issues raised in this part of the study may be divided into three categories: Module Level Monitoring and Evaluation: Peer Review: Closing the Feedback Loop

Module-Level Monitoring & Evaluation:

a. General Issues:

- There is not a consistent practice across the University in terms of module level monitoring and evaluation.
- ABS is unique in the sense that it has in place a highly efficient quality unit to deal with Annual Monitoring and Evaluation.
- The majority of the participants noted that in some cases there is a division between module owners and module deliverers. Those responsible for delivering some, or all, of the module are not necessarily involved in eliciting student feedback, or in any of the module evaluation procedures.
- Good practice does not appear to be shared across the University.

b. Student feedback form:

- The lack of consistency across the University with student module feedback forms varying from School to School, Department to Department and in some cases, Module to Module was noted by the vast majority of the participants.
- The consensus of opinion was that the student module feedback form is far too complicated, attempting to capture too much information with little room for comment on lecture content, context or quality.
- All academic participants believed that students are repeatedly asked to comment on non-academic issues such as the learning environment, library resources and social space. The consensus was that the focus of student

feedback needed to 'shift' towards academic content and quality of teaching, and away from environmental and other issues.

- There was little or no awareness amongst academic staff Focus Group participants that student module feedback should inform Quality Enhancement. Only one participant commented that student feedback shapes their subsequent lectures.

Recommendations: Student Feedback Forms (Modula)

- (i) Student module feedback forms need to be restructured. In doing this the following issues need to be addressed:**
 - The purpose of eliciting student feedback for each module needs to be clarified. Those responsible for module delivery (as opposed to those responsible for module ownership), and those responsible for analysing student feedback, need to be made aware of why student feedback is important and how it should be used.
 - The length of any restructured feedback form needs to be considered – with attention paid as to what is important. In short, the form needs to be concise and 'fit for purpose'. Consideration needs to be given for increasing the space given for feedback about the lecture content and teaching quality (whilst reducing space dedicated to environmental and other matters).
 - Student feedback should be used primarily to empower staff to enhance teaching and learning practices.
 - The possibility of introducing a 'standardised' form, for use across the University, should be considered.
- (ii) The timing of distribution of student feedback forms needs to be looked at. Forms are often distributed at the end of term when many students have gone home.**
- (iii) The option of introducing 'module teams' responsible for module delivery needs to be considered. Such teams would address difficulties caused by disparities in module ownership, module delivery and student feedback.**
- (iv) A mechanism for sharing good practice across the University would promote Quality Enhancement across all Schools.**

c. Peer Review:

- Peer Review did not appear to be taken seriously by the academic Focus Group participants with only one member of staff stating that she had participated in a peer review process.
- The majority of the Focus Group participants stated they had either never been peer reviewed, or hadn't been peer reviewed for over 5 years.
- There was some confusion amongst all of the academic Focus Group participants regarding the difference between peer review and peer observation.
- The possibility of introducing 'external' peer reviews was seen in a positive light by all of the academic staff participants.
- The concept of compulsory peer review was viewed with suspicion by all of the academic staff.

Recommendations: Peer Review

- (i) The Peer Review system needs to be scrutinised in some depth. In doing so the following issues need to be considered:**
 - **There appears to be a lack of consistency in academic practice in this area reflecting a lack of awareness regarding Quality Assurance and Enhancement.**
 - **A distinction should be made between peer observation and peer review.**
- (ii) The concept of Peer Review needs to be expanded to encapsulate all teaching and learning tools and strategies including the use of VLE.**

Programme Approval

Programme Approval was generally perceived to be a 'bottom up' process in which programme proposers undertake the vast majority of the work in 'total' isolation. The whole process was perceived to be time-consuming and cumbersome, with little cohesion between the various committees responsible for evaluating new programmes at different stages. There also appears to be a lack of cohesion and consistency across the University in relation to Programme Approval processes and procedures.

a. Module Approval Template and Programme Proposal Form.

- The majority of the Focus Group participants were not familiar with either the module approval template or the programme proposal form. Only one of the participants had used the programme proposal form in developing a new programme.
- All of the Focus Group participants agreed that changes to modules were made without due consideration.
- The majority of the participants perceived there to be little or no relationship between programme learning outcomes and module learning outcomes.

b. Role of Teaching Committee and School Level Programme Committee.

- Inconsistencies were identified in the role played by Teaching Committees and School Level Committees in Programme Approval processes.
- Participants from Engineering commented that new programmes are simply 'waived' through at Committee level, whilst Business School participants stated new programme proposals are discussed at length in Teaching Committee.

c. Role of QSC and Associated Committees.

- With one exception, Focus Group participants were unaware of the process whereby the QSC appoints a single member to work with programme proposers.
- All of the FG participants commented that Schools do not appear to work closely with QSC and its associated committees.

d. Student Participation & Programme Approval

- The general consensus was that students are not consulted regarding the development and introduction of new programmes.

Recommendations: Programme Approval:

- (i) The Programme Approval Template & Programme Approval Forms need to be reformatted. In doing so the following issues should be taken into account:**
- **Consideration might be given to centralising the whole process by means of an electronic database to which programme proposers, reviewers and other relevant parties have access. This would provide**

key stakeholder with an overview of the processes involved in Programme Approval.

- At present, the bureaucratic processes are viewed as cumbersome and time consuming. Any new mechanism should aim to be succinct, but concise.
 - Staff need to be made aware of the existence of the PA Template and Forms.
- (ii) Appointment of a member of QSC to work with programme proposers from inception to conclusion.
- The study suggests that programme proposers tend to work in isolation. The possibility of appointing a member of the QSC to work with proposers from inception to conclusion was supported by all participants (at the moment the QSC appoint a person to work with the programme proposer when the proposal reaches QASC).
- (iii) The role played by Teaching & School Level Committees in Programme Approval needs to be clarified, with particular emphasis on the responsibilities of such Committees.
- (iv) A mechanism by which good practice may be shared across the University should be put into place.
- (v) Consideration might be given to replacing the Committee Approval processes with a Panel Approval system. This would speed up PA and promote cohesive working.

Internal Review

Internal Review seems to be the most positive part of Quality Assurance and Enhancement. However, the link between IR and QE needs to be clarified and reinforced.

a. **Training of Panel Chairs & Members.**

- The exploratory study participants, all of whom had been panel chairs and/or members, all commented on difficulties caused by inadequate training of Panel Members and Chairs.

b. External Validation & IR

- The majority of participants agreed that the mechanism by which similar documentation is used in External Validation and Internal Review is a positive attribute of QA and QE.

c. Feedback Following Review

- The general consensus was that feedback following review is viewed positively. However, issues were raised regarding the length of time taken to 'close the feedback loop'.
- A small number of individuals perceived there to be a paucity of feedback from QSC to Schools following Review.
- The time taken for 'feedback' on the 'feedback' was also noted by a minority of the participants – with one commenting the School could take up to two years to respond to issues raised in IR.

Recommendations: Internal Review

- (i) Training of all Panel and Chair Members should be introduced in order to guarantee consistency of approach.**
- (ii) Where possible, external validation and Internal Review should be aligned.**
- (iii) Feedback mechanisms need to be tightened up. This may involve:**
 - **Placing time limits on Schools to respond to reviewers' feedback following IR.**
 - **Placing limitations on the time taken for reports to be forwarded to the QSC outlining issues raised and actions taken.**
 - **Predetermining the maximum time it should take for the QSC to respond to Schools following submission of the IR report.**

University Regulations.

The analogy of 'painting the Forth Road Bridge' was used to conceptualise the processes and policies involved in developing, interpreting and administering University Regulations. It should be noted that whilst around 20 staff indicated they would like to attend the Focus Group looking at University Regulation, only 6 people actually turned up on the day.

a. Drive for Consistency in some areas of Regulations

- The general consensus was that drive for consistency in some areas of UG & PG regulations was both necessary and timely.
- There appeared to be a lack of consistency across the University regarding policies relating to 'scaling' (the process by which excel is used as a tool to evaluate programme/ module marking and raise or lower the average mark). The Focus Group participants from engineering indicated that scaling was a commonly used tool whereas participants from other Schools felt it was not.
- Those responsible for PG programmes argued that the new regulations meant they could no longer award 'Merits' or 'Distinctions' at sub-Degree level (PG Certificate/ PG Diploma). The point was made that this could result in students opting to study elsewhere should they wish to be graded on their Post Graduate study.

b. Awareness of Regulations

- All of the participants commented on their own lack of awareness of the regulatory frameworks. It was noted that this is a 'wide area' in which only a few individual have specialised knowledge.
- All of the participants perceived students to have no awareness of the regulations.
- The need to disseminate knowledge about regulatory frameworks was noted by the majority of participants.

c. Student Behaviour & Regulations

- The main issues relating to student behaviour and regulations reflected concerns about the manner in which plagiarism is dealt with across the University. There was a general lack of awareness of the Regulations in this area amongst the Focus Group participants. There was also general dissatisfaction in perceptions of the lenient approach taken towards plagiarism and other instances where students are caught cheating.
- Concerns were raised regarding student behaviour both inside and outside the classroom. The consensus was that the regulations are not draconian enough and that as a result, some students may be put in danger (by others misbehaviour).
- Matters relating to attendance at lectures and tutorials were debated at some length – but no consensus of opinion reached regarding whether attendance should be compulsory and a 'register' kept.

Recommendations: Regulations:

- (i) The drive for consistency in some areas of the regulations could be expanded to all areas of academic practice and student life to include issues around 'scaling' of average marks, student behaviour, attendance, use of shared facilities and social space.**
- (ii) Consideration needs to be given to the regulations regarding PG Sub-Degree classification.**
- (iii) The suggestion that some students may choose to study elsewhere because they cannot be awarded a Merit or Distinction cannot be ignored.**
- (iv) A mechanism needs to be put into place to disseminate knowledge about key regulations and changes to regulations.**
- (v) One way of beginning to achieve could be during staff induction. New staff need to be made aware of how regulations impact upon their professional practice and teaching.**
- (vi) Consideration might be given to introduce 'Fitness to Practice' regulations to apply to students in some or all academic areas.**

Commonalities across all Focus Groups & Interviews.

1. Committees & Subcommittees.

- Comments were repeatedly made about the nature and role of committees and committee membership. Many of the participants seemed confused as to whose responsibility it is to feedback decisions made and issues raised by Committees (this confusion included one senior manager who sits on QSC and other School level committees).
- There needs to be a simple mechanism by which all staff are made aware of committee level actions, decisions and discussions. The use of a summary, passed round by e-mail, seems to be the simplest way of doing this – although consideration could also be given to the use of VLE.

2. The Feedback 'Loop'

- The lack of a 'feedback' loop was noted in all areas of QA and QE. The need to close the 'feedback loop' and provide 'feedback on feedback' was noted as

being particularly important. Structures need to be put into place to 'close the feedback loop' in all areas without causing more bureaucracy.

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