

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND STANDARDS OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: THE CURRENT EXPERIENCE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, UNITED KINGDOM

Roger Mills

Regional Director
The Open University in East Anglia
Cambridge, United Kingdom
a.r.mills@open.ac.uk

Introduction

Over the last 6 years or so there have been two main aspects of quality assurance of teaching and learning in the UK, general Institutional Quality Assurance Audit and Teaching Quality Assessment. This paper describes the experience of the Open University, United Kingdom (OU UK) which has been involved in two institutional quality assurance audits and over 10 teaching quality assessments over this period. It also reports briefly on some of the developing ideas for the further refinement of the audit process in the UK including the new draft guidelines for Distance Education. The paper forms the background to a presentation to be given at the 10th Anniversary Conference of the Commonwealth of Learning in Brunei in March 1999 and will be up-dated at that time. The presentation and the paper aim to provide an insight into the processes of external quality assurance audits as they have been conducted in the OU UK.

General Institutional Quality Audit

The Open University has been involved in two of these institution-wide audits, the first in July 1992 and the second in May 1998. In both cases the University was a willing partner in the process and positively welcomed the involvement of the auditors. The methodology used in the first audit had been revised by the time of the second audit but both involved a visit for four days by a team of 3 auditors.

The 1992 Audit of the Open University

This was conducted on behalf of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, CVCP (1992) by its Academic Audit Unit.

The Terms of Reference were:

- to consider and review universities' mechanisms for monitoring and promoting the academic standards which are necessary for achieving their stated aims and objectives
- to comment on the extent to which procedures in place in individual universities reflect the best practice in maintaining quality
- to identify and commend to universities good practice in regard to the maintenance of academic standards at a national level.

In line with the methodology in place in 1992 the Audit Team listed a number of commendations and identified issues which the University might wish to consider in developing its mechanisms for quality assurance.

Examples of Commendations (there were 14 in all)

The following are typical of the kinds of general commendations made by auditors in 1992

- the thoroughness with which its new courses are designed and developed
- the formulation and implementation of equal opportunities practice
- the quality of introductory documentation for students
- its commitment to residential schools
- the quality of counselling and the provision of facilities for disabled students
- the approach of the University on Quality Tuition.

Examples of issues for further consideration (there were 21 in all)

- whether the present arrangements for the discharging of the University's corporate responsibility for quality assurance at the highest levels is sufficiently focused
- whether a simplification of the committee structure might be beneficial
- whether the responsibilities of the faculties and the regions for quality assurance are sufficiently well defined.
- whether there are opportunities for greater use of external contributions to course development and review.
- whether it has adequate mechanisms to oversee the monitoring of tuition
- whether senior committees such as the Teaching and Counselling Committee have adequate mechanisms to ensure that their policies are implemented by faculties and regions
- whether the pressure of increasing student numbers threatens the ability to devote sufficient time to monitoring the marking of assignments
- whether the procedures by which faculties are required to act on the reports of external examiners should be formalised to achieve more effective central monitoring.

The 1992 audit was followed by the setting up of a Quality Assurance Panel, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and the establishment of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor role which included Quality Assurance as a major element. The Panel set up an issues log where every recommendation made by any external audit was logged and tracked through until either a new process was introduced or it was decided explicitly not to follow the recommendation.

The 1998 Institutional Continuation Audit

By 1998 the responsibility for UK Quality Assurance had moved to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which was established in April 1997 as a private company limited by guarantee whose board members represent most stakeholders. It is contracted by the Higher Education Funding Council to undertake Quality Audits and assessments on its behalf and its aims are:

- To secure value from public investment
 - by ensuring all funded education is of approved quality
 - by encouraging speedy correction of major shortcomings
 - by using Teaching Quality Assessments (TQAs) to inform funding.
- To encourage improvement through publication of reports, to share good practice and to provide public information.

In conducting its work in relation to the continuation audit the QAA adopted a new approach which invited the University to produce a critical self-analysis addressing the following key questions:

- How do you know whether you are discharging effectively your responsibilities for the standard of each award granted in your name, and for the quality of education provided by you?
- Can you convince us that the evidence you are relying on for this purpose is sufficient, valid and reliable?

The production of the self-analysis was an interesting and productive exercise for the University with care being taken to be open and honest, demonstrating self-awareness of weaknesses without being too self-critical. As in the previous audit a team of three auditors visited the University for 4 days. Understandably, one of the first questions the 1998 audit team asked was 'what had the University done to implement the recommendations of the audit six years previously?' The establishment of an Issues Log (1993) helped enormously in answering this key question as each recommendation made by the 1992 and subsequent external audit teams, as well as some made by External Examiners, had been recorded and tracked through to action or explicit decision not to act. The institutional audit reporting system had developed from that in 1992 with the teams setting out points for commendation followed by three categories of points for further consideration.

- Category one is quite critical; 'the University will wish to consider the *necessity* of' certain actions.
- Category 2 asked the University to consider 'the *advisability* of' certain actions and
- category 3 'the *desirability* of' certain actions.

- What follows is taken from the Draft Report of the 1998 audit and has still to be agreed. QAA (1998).

Examples of points for commendation (there were 10 in all)

- the progress in addressing the recommendations of previous audits!
- the progress in integrating regional activities with the centre
- its approach to course design and the involvement of students in this process through the piloting of material
- the use made of feedback from students and staff.

Examples of points for further consideration (there were 13 in all)

the *necessity* of (1)

- ensuring that regulations are approved prior to the commencement of a new course or programme

the *advisability* of (6)

- reviewing the Career Development and Appraisal scheme
- increasing external involvement at the programme level and considering the need to separate more clearly the roles of external assessor and external examiner
- reviewing its academic appeals and complaints procedures

the *desirability* of (6)

- continuing to review the nature and scope of the Internal Review process
- evaluating the effectiveness of the document *A Guide to Quality Assurance* (1996)
- providing induction courses for new committee members.

In general the Audit Team came to the conclusion that “ the University was at present well able to manage its responsibilities for quality and standards effectively”.

Although the University has found the Institutional Quality Audit processes reassuring and supportive it is doubtful whether the process has done more than confirm the areas where the University already knew it needed to take some action.

As there is no scoring system for these General Audits it is difficult to compare one institution with another. The Teaching Quality Assessments do enable inter institutional and intra-institutional comparisons and the process for these will be described next.

Teaching Quality Assessments

These are undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and cover an Institution’s provision in particular subject areas such as Biology, Psychology, Geography, Business Studies and General Engineering etc. The main features of the methodology are:

- peer review
- self-assessment
- review set against provider’s own aims
- a review visit
- a published and public report.

Aspects of provision

The methodology examines six different aspects of an Institution’s provision:

- Curriculum design, content and organisation
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student progression and achievement
- Student support and guidance
- Learning resources
- Quality management and enhancement

In examining each of these aspects, the assessors (and there were 7 in a recent visit to the Open University spending in total 33 days in the University) applied the following test:

“To what extent do the student learning experience and student achievement, within each aspect of provision, contribute to meeting the objectives set by the provider?”

Each aspect is numerically graded on a 4 point scale enabling inter and intra-Institutional comparisons to be made with a score of 22—24 points being regarded as excellent provision.

In a recent survey by the Daily Telegraph newspaper, based on University Departments scoring 22-24 points in Teaching Quality Assessments, the Open University came 10th and 11th out of nearly 100 Universities in 1997 and 1998 respectively. No longer can it be said that distance teaching and learning are second-rate!

At the time of writing, the Open University's most recent Teaching Quality Assessment was in the subject area of General Engineering, a generic descriptor covering 43 courses at undergraduate and post graduate level in the Faculty of Technology. Between them, these courses were studied in 1998 by some 19,600 undergraduate and post-graduate students for awards totalling 1850 UK national Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATS) points.

This is a major element of the University's provision and the Faculty, which has 76 full-time central academics at Walton Hall, 23 full-time regional staff tutors and over 1100 Associate part-time lecturers, covers five thematic areas:

- information technology
- environmental management
- management of technology
- technological design
- professional development in engineering.

The assessment team awarded the Faculty 4 points in each aspect of provision, totalling 24 points, the maximum which can be given. Under each of the 6 aspects of provision it was stated that 'the aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives and that the aims of the provider were met'.

There were no criticisms or suggestions for improvement in the draft conclusions. (Draft Report on Teaching Quality Assessment (1998)).

Guidelines for Distance Education

Currently there are a number of bodies working on guidelines for quality assurance processes specifically for distance education. The Standing Committee of Presidents of ICDE Institutions, SCOP (1998) has discussed this at a recent seminar. The Quality Assurance Agency in the UK (QAA 1998) has produced draft guidelines which are currently being revised. And the United States Council for Higher Education Accreditation is devoting its second annual conference in February 1999 to the theme of assuring quality in distance learning.

The Quality Assurance Agency Draft Guidelines

Purpose

The purpose of the UK guidelines is to provide definitions, identify challenges and look at how physical separation of the teacher and the learner impacts upon the way in which teaching and learning is managed.

Scope of the Guidelines

The guidelines aim to cover all arrangements made by UK institutions to provide a programme of distance learning, whether at home or overseas. These include franchising arrangements, those areas where the 'distance element' presents a special challenge, administrative and operational infrastructure and are predicated on the assumption that all the general Quality Assurance Agency guidelines are followed.

It is also argued that guidelines for distance education could become the 'gold-standard' for all.

Dimensions of Distance Learning

These cover the nature of the distance education programme and how learning is delivered and supported locally, learning delivered by travelling teachers and resource-based learning.

Aspects examined include programme design and approval, quality management, delivery systems, learner support, student assessment and the maintenance of academic standards.

The future of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the UK

It is clear from the above account that the impact of the range of quality assurance processes on an individual institution is substantial. Over the past year the Quality Assurance Agency has embarked on a wide consultation with all stakeholders involved in higher education to look at ways of continuing to provide an assurance that Higher Education is doing its job well without imposing an unreasonable burden on the Institutions.

The new approach to Quality Assurance in higher education in the UK has been agreed and is about to enter a two year period of testing. The approach is described in full in *higher quality* (1998) and is summarised briefly here.

General

To ensure that:

- there is public confidence
- those who use and those who pay have information about performance (including the Funding Councils)
- the system of QA is effective, efficient and economical.

Assuring Standards and Quality

- arrangements for QA must ensure that all awards made meet standards required
- there must be a check on whether standards are appropriate for each programme of study
- there must be a check on the quality of learning opportunities for students.

Public accountability

This will be achieved by the publication of periodic reports on the different aspects and levels of quality assurance within an Institution, including its own internal review processes.

Further details of the new process, which includes the appointment, remuneration and training Academic Reviewers from the cohorts of practising academics or persons from professional and employment backgrounds with relevant knowledge and experiences, can be found in *higher quality*.

References

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