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Creativity and Diversity
Challenges for quality assurance beyond 2010

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"Horton Hears A Who"
Listening to the student voice

Proposal for paper: a specific institutional quality assurance approach to student engagement in the learning experience. This paper will discuss and share experiences of practices at Bath Spa University in a new quality assurance initiative and will encourage feedback from participants. Lessons will be drawn from the case presented, including success factors, challenges encountered, and potential failures.

Abstract: The UK National Union of Students' Student Experience Report, 2008 states "92% of students are given the opportunity to provide feedback about their course, yet only 51% of these students believe that this feedback is acted upon. While only 23% of students feel involved in shaping the curriculum or design of their course, 57% would welcome such involvement". The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information's report on student engagement, 2009, demonstrates that universities in England agree, stating "…just over half of HEIs also indicated that they would like to be doing more on student engagement processes…". So, what more can we do? Part 3, European Standards and Guidelines, standards for external quality assurance agencies states that external quality assurance processes used should include external assessment by experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s). This has led to institutions adopting this approach. But, does it work? And, how else can we engage students effectively in improving the collective learning experience?

Institutional case study: Bath Spa University

<u>The University's quality management approach</u>

Bath Spa University is a relatively small institution, with around 5500 full time equivalent students, studying a range of courses in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and performing arts subject areas, from Foundation degree through to doctorates. The University was designated a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in the creative industries, in 2005. Through the development of innovative learning and teaching combined with strengthened links with key employers and industry partners, the Centre supports new models of education and is intended to enhance the employability of students at the University. The University is committed to its role as custodians of two exceptionally beautiful and historic campuses. The University takes its environmental responsibilities seriously, and has a Silver Eco Campus award.

The University performs well in the National Student Survey, student satisfaction figures for 2008 published by Unistats show that Bath Spa achieved an overall satisfaction rating of 84 per cent, which was above the national average of 82 per cent. The University also performs well in external assessments, such as those undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

As it is a smaller institution, many processes and policies are centralised, including quality management, rather than devolved to its Schools. The University's Academic Office has responsibility for quality management, including the external examining system; annual monitoring/planning; course approval/internal periodic review; and student engagement.

Academic Office has a quality management strategy, which has ten strategic objectives, informed by the University's strategic plan, regional, national and international objectives. These include: continuing to ensure that the student learning experience is supported by explicit, fair and consistently applied policies and procedures in the area of quality management to demonstrate that the University is 'student-facing'; continuing to ensure that policies and procedures are designed to allow the University to maintain, monitor and review the academic standards of awards granted in its name, and enhance the quality of learning opportunities at all teaching locations, including sites of collaborative provision; ensuring that information relating to quality management made available to students, prospective students, staff and other stakeholders is clear, explicit and accessible to promote clarity and ease of use; continuing development of a 'quality culture' that promotes an ethos of continuous improvement that embeds quality assurance and enhancement into everyday policy and practice; encouraging greater engagement with students and ensuring that policies and procedures are 'student-facing' to achieve coherence with national and international agendas; and utilising the student learning experience to enhance the employability prospects of our graduates through the promotion of personal development planning, and work based learning.

The strategy is supported by annual operating plans, which identify actions, outcomes, measures, resourcing and responsibilities.

<u>Contexts and constraints</u>

The National Union of Students (NUS) published a report on internal quality assurance, involving students in periodic review, as part of their 'Quality Matters' series, in 2009. This identified their vision for the involvement of students in periodic review and included focusing on the student learning experience through including students at every level of the process, especially by including them as full members of review panels; recognising course representatives as key drivers for educational change and involving them full yin the process; improving public information through ensuring reports and outcomes are widely published; and inviting the greatest number of students to submit their views and opinions about their experiences as possible.

The NUS is a voluntary membership organisation, which represents the interests of around 7 million students, in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This makes it one of the largest student organisations in the world, and it is also a member of the European Students' Union (ESU, formerly ESIB). NUS provide research, representation, training to students' unions and to students.

Coincidental with this, following the piloting of the involvement of student observers on audit teams during 2007/08, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education signalled its intent to implement this fully within Institutional audit procedures, following consultation with the sector.

QAA is a charitable organisation, funded by the funding councils, other contractual activity, and subscriptions from its members, universities and other higher education institutions. It has existed in its current form since 1997, although its predecessors included, for example, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), and the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals' (CVCP) Academic Audit Unit. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) also undertook quality assessment visits. Whilst HEQC undertook institutional-level assessment, HEFCE undertook subject or discipline level assessment. QAA attempted to integrate both, with the introduction of Academic Review in 2001, at which the sector baulked. The-then Chief Executive of QAA was forced to resign, QAA forced to re-think its approach. The result was Institutional audit.

This methodology has three foci – the effective management of academic standards; the provision of learning opportunities of sufficient quality; and institutional enhancement of educational provision. It occurs every six years (or more frequently if any difficulties are identified), is undertaken by a team of peer auditors, and results in a publicly available report, containing judgments on academic standards; the quality of learning opportunities; and an institution's published teaching quality information. The latest iteration of audit utilises the role of the student reviewer.

NUS supported this intention, and noted its alignment with ENQA's European Standards and Guidelines, and the practice of a number of European countries' quality assurance agencies. So, ENQA informed QAA and NUS, who have then influenced institutional processes across the UK, including at Bath Spa University.

Both NUS and QAA recognised the need to provide a role description and training, and queried whether students would be willing and able to engage with quality assurance documentation, and whether students would have the knowledge and skills to contribute to judgements and reports. To inform the use of students as auditors, QAA worked with a number of institutions that already included students as members of periodic review teams, and developed criteria as appropriate.

The institutional case study

Bath Spa has recently re-designed and re-approved its entire undergraduate modular scheme. This was a long-term project, over around three years. Research work was undertaken in the first instance, with other institutions, and with external examiners. Consultation was undertaken with academic staff and with students. Aims for the re-design were agreed by the University's Academic Board (to improve retention; to increase choice for students; to maximise opportunities for graduate-level employment for students on completion of their courses), and a structure developed to support these.

It was agreed, at an early stage, that students would be asked to act as reviewers during the re-approval events, which were organised on a subject basis. A pilot study was undertaken primarily, using a postgraduate student in the validation of a course to be offered by a private provider.

Following this successful activity, the University agreed with the Students' Union that student reviewers would be used for the re-approval events for the undergraduate modular scheme. The Students' Union suggested that it would be most appropriate to use existing course representatives, as this ensured that the prospective reviewers would have some familiarity with University decision-making processes, its structure for quality assurance, and prior experience of communicating the views of students to other stakeholders.

The Students' Union assumed responsibility for identifying student reviewers, and the University assumed responsibility for briefing them on their role. This was done fairly informally, with no recruitment or selection process utilised. If such a process were to be introduced, both parties suspect that students may be dissuaded from taking part. Students were equal members of the panels and paid for their contribution. Student reviewers were drawn from the pool of student representatives at the University.

Students proved generally able to understand the majority of institutional quality management policies and processes. They made positive and constructive comments ahead of the re-approval event itself, and fully engaged with the process on the day, asking questions, and feeding back their thoughts and views.

Students were not able to contribute to the re-approval of their own subject area through this particular mechanism (although others were made available). The University felt it would be a conflict of interest to ask students to comment, sometimes critically, on their own subject area.

Students were expected to read the documentation provided three weeks ahead of the re-approval event, which included a student handbook, sample module handbooks, and University policies, such as the Assessment Policy. All panel members were given specific areas of responsibility – the University's panels include academics (external subject-specific, and internal, from another department) and employers. Employers, for example, were asked to comment on employability and external engagement. Students were asked to comment on how students were engaged and supported, and how 'user-friendly' the documentation provided was. Students were asked to comment on the draft report, and, along with other panel members complete an evaluation report to allow the University to 'quality assure the quality assurance'.

<u>Barriers encountered in implementing the new practice and solutions adopted</u>

These were surprisingly limited! Some of the potential factors identified by NUS and QAA simply did not apply at Bath Spa (ie time constraints). Students did ask why they were unable to review their own area of study, but the University felt that this may place students in a potentially difficult situation if they were in a position whereby their course was being criticised.

Panels readily accepted the student reviewer, as did course teams. The student reviewers attended an hour's briefing session, whereby the purpose of the event was explained, the timetable for the day, and the documentation. Students contributed confidently to the events held.

Student reviewers did occasionally identify matters as difficulties that other reviewers would not, such as the inclusion of examinations within assessment types, but readily accepted explanations provided.

One difficulty was perhaps in how representative the student representative was, and whether they were expressing their own, individual reviews, as opposed to that of their peers.

Another was that this process involved students generally in quality management activities, but not directly in the enhancement of their own course, the preference indicated in the NUS Student Experience Report.

<u>Status to date</u>

The re-approval of the undergraduate modular scheme is now complete. At present, we do not involve students with course approval processes. Consideration of this may be the next step in the University's continued commitment to involving students to a greater extent.

We are analysing all policies and processes 'owned' by Academic Office to assess where students are involved and where they might be involved to a greater extent. Annual monitoring reports are received by a student representative at School Board and at Academic Quality and Standards Committee, but this limits receipt to two or three individuals. It may be that the University wishes to consider a more general circulation of such documents, and possibly consider asking course leaders to evidence how such documents have been shared with and informed by their students.

Our new course approval process does not have any student involvement, other than for approval documentation being received by Academic Quality and Standards Committee, where the President of the Students' Union is a member. One difficulty here, frequently discussed, is whether students are able to comment effectively upon academic standards, given that their experiences of learning outcomes, assessment, curricula and achievement will necessarily be limited. Their area of expertise would seem to be, on the surface, the quality of learning opportunities made available to students which enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their course, as demonstrated through assessment. For example, students seem well-placed to comment upon learning resources, learning and teaching strategies, and progression – from admission and induction through to careers advice on graduation.

The University is currently working upon strengthening the information made available to students via the external examining system, which is utilised at both undergraduate and postgraduate level in the UK. Reports are provided by examiners, which are then read by the Head of Quality Management, who provides a summary, including points to be addressed by the course team. The course leader then prepares a response to this, which is returned to the examiner, and to Academic Office. We plan to make the summary and response available to all students via our virtual learning environment.

Another of our concerns is around student feedback more generally, and not just that given on specific courses. Courses operate a module evaluation questionnaire system and it is unclear at present as to how consistently these are responded to across the institution.

Lessons learned

The University has a clear view of where it would wish to involve students but this may not coincide with the view of students on their involvement! We are, therefore, currently in discussion with the Students' Union about the development of a student engagement strategy – to be written by students, and then presented to our Learning and Teaching Committee for agreement. This would have to be developed by the students within a

clear framework provided by the University to exclude matters that the University is simply unable to address, thus managing student expectations appropriately. For example, Bath Spa University is located on Duchy of Cornwall land, our landscape being 'protected' by English Heritage, as are the majority of our buildings, which include a grade II listed Georgian manor house. Thus, car parking is limited and cannot be extended beyond its current remit. To then allow students to believe that car parking matters may be redressed through this process would give rise to unachievable goals.

Although it was an expectation of the re-approval process that course teams would consult with their students, it soon became apparent that the majority of course teams had *informed* their students rather than consulted with them. This suggests that the University needs to undertake some work its course teams to ensure that students are properly and fully consulted with on changes to courses. However, some course teams adopted innovative approaches to consulting with students, such as working with them on a SWOT analysis of their subject area. This has given rise to further initiatives. For example, the University is currently looking to revise its periodic review process, whereby subject areas and their constituent courses are reviewed by a team of external peer reviewers (including academic and professional representatives) every six years. We are currently in discussion with the Students' Union on the use of a 'student written submission' in this process, to complement the self-evaluation prepared by the course team. One idea is that the SWOT analysis be utilised to develop the written submission from the students. A written submission might allow for the views of the majority to be presented to the panel.

The student reviewer used in such events is from another subject area, and although the panel meet with students during re-approval events, there are generally no more then ten in attendance (due to space limitation, as much as anything). This, again, raises a question around how representative of the general student population the students in attendance are. Students, in our experience, have a tendency to present their own views rather than those of the collective. The University operates a Students' Representatives Committee, a sub-committee of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, which is attended by School representatives, and representatives from our partners (further education colleges and other organisations). These students are sent papers (such as assessment policies, personal development planning policies etc) which they are asked to share with their fellow students in order to report back an informed view to the Committee so that such policies can be developed further. Unfortunately, for reasons we are as yet unclear on, this does not happen, and students present their own views. The University and the Students' Union are working closely on trying to ensure that the representatives are representative.

Key issues to be mastered

- How representative are student representatives? How can we encourage or assist them in being more representative?

- How do we involve the under-represented groups, such as part-time or mature students?

- How can we involve the majority of students, rather than the minority, in the collective learning experience?

- How can we identify what elements of the collective learning experience students would like to be involved with, such as the involvement of students in course design, as highlighted in the NUS report?

References

CHERI *Report to HEFCE on student engagement* 2009

NUS *Quality matters for students internal quality assurance involving students in periodic review* 2009

NUS *Student Experience Report* 2008

NUS *NUS Response QAA Consultation Student Membership of Institutional Audit* 2007

QAA *Student membership of audit and review team, Learning from periodic review* 2008