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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Short bio (150 words max):

Since 2009, Tina Harrison has had overall responsibility for the quality assurance framework at the University of Edinburgh, including the on-going cycle of internal programme reviews and the quality assurance framework for student services. She joined the University in 1993 and still holds an academic position in the Business School and continues to engage in teaching and research. She is a member of Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland's ELIR 3 (Enhancement-led Institutional Review) Committee that has oversight of the current institutional review method, is a member of the sparqs (Student Participation in Quality Scotland) University Advisory Group, and represents the University sector on the SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications) Quality Committee. She is also a member of the UK Quality Strategy Network Executive. She is actively engaged in the development of QA structures and processes in the Kosovan higher education sector through involvement in EU Tempus-funded projects with EU partners.

Proposal

Title: Assuring and enhancing teaching and learning through effective alignment of internal and external review methods

Abstract (150 words max):

In recent years there has been a paradigm shift in education from teaching to learning. A key question is whether the same shift in focus is reflected in the core purpose of quality assurance processes. External quality assurance has been criticised for focusing on method and not student learning, but if effectively aligned with internal processes can have a transformational impact. Set against this context, the paper discusses three types of possible alignment: linear, nested and contiguous alignment. Using examples from the University of Edinburgh, the paper illustrates how external methods can be aligned in such a way to focus on assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction



In recent years there has been a paradigm shift in education from teaching to learning. To what extent is the same shift reflected in the core purpose of quality assurance processes? Harvey (2002, p.252) notes: "Although evaluations have a range of purposes, it is not always clear whether the focus is on the quality of the process or the standard of the outcome?" Harvey argues that quality assurance tends to be preoccupied with method and not with student learning, and that improvement in student learning requires a real engagement with learning processes.

Quality assurance systems are complex and multi-layered. Institutions interact with multiple constituents or quality monitoring groups (Bender and Stiller, 2006). A key element perhaps is to understand the limits of certain methods and, in particular, the specific roles of both external and internal quality assurance methods.

According to Harvey (2005), external quality monitoring in the UK has been characterised by accountability and compliance and a failure to engage learning and transformation. There have been more recent improvements to these processes in the UK and notably Scotland's enhancement-led approach, but the limits of external institution-level processes have been noted elsewhere. For example, Shah (2013) notes that the literature on the effectiveness of external quality audit/review suggests that audits have not transformed higher education and do not contribute to institutional improvement and enhancement of student learning. His findings from an analysis of 10 years of quality audits in Australia reveal that the main areas of improvement relate to quality strategy development, governance and student feedback collection, but that external audits have had limited impact on enhancement of the student experience and have failed to assess education outcomes.

However, Shah (2013) also notes that if external audits are effectively aligned with internal systems and processes they can impact on the student learning experience. Indeed, scholars have noted the symbiotic relationship between internal and external processes (Harvey, 2002) and argue that internal and external perspectives should be better linked (Jordens and Zepke, 2009; Brink, 2010). External monitoring can never stand alone or replace internal monitoring (Kristensen, 1997), particularly in terms of getting close to the student learning experience. To redress the balance between teaching and learning requires careful alignment of all methods of quality monitoring and review, in particular alignment between internal and external methods.

The paper aims to demonstrate, using examples from the University of Edinburgh, how internal and external review processes can be effectively aligned in an enhancement-led approach that focuses on enhancement of the student learning experience.

Rationale for alignment of internal and external reviews

Why would we want to align internal and external reviews? Quality monitoring in the UK has been beset by overlapping and burdensome processes and competing notions of quality (Harvey, 2005). There is a general desire to increase the resource efficiency of quality assurance, to reduce unnecessary duplication and smooth out potential tensions between different methods. A key goal in alignment is to increase the overall effectiveness of the quality assurance whole and to provide a clearer focus and purpose to the constituent parts.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are subject to a number of different types of reviews by different bodies and at different levels. Review types vary in scale from institution-wide reviews to reviews at the programme level. Reviews also vary in terms of whether



they are conducted by external bodies or internally within the institution. The external/internal distinction implies a difference in terms of initiation and ownership. External reviews are typically initiated outside the institution, tend to be more accountability-oriented and less sensitive to internal needs and missions, whereas internally-initiated reviews tend to be more problem-driven and useful as a means of improvement and are more sensitive to institutional goals (Askling, 1997). However, this distinction can be blurred. For example, the current third cycle of the Scottish Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) method is much more sensitive to institutional needs, and the internal review methods, whilst internally operated, must comply with external expectations and guidance.

Whilst we talk in terms of review methods, such as institutional review, audit or accreditation, Harvey and Newton (2004) argue that the core purpose of the method often seems to be 'taken for granted'. They question what the fundamental objective of the evaluation is: the provider, the programme, the learner or the output? They contend that despite the claims that methods focus on the learner experience, most approaches focus on an evaluation of the provision.

The different mechanisms and bodies potentially serve a number of purposes: to demonstrate accountability, to safeguard reputation, for programme improvement, or any combination of these. The objectives of quality assurance are manifold in principle but in practice focus on either accountability or improvement, although it is recognised that both can be balanced (Frank et al., 2012). Regarding the professions, quality assurance in the form of specialised accreditation assures 'fitness to practice' and can serve to act as a form of 'consumer protection' Lester (2010) (cited in Frank et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding the benefits of alignment, there are however a number of challenges. The varying review methods differ in terms of their missions and goals, their methods (desk-based versus site visit), procedures (schedules, timing and cycles), target audiences, requirements and differences in terms of attention to assurance, compliance, audit versus improvement and enhancement.

Meaning of alignment

A dictionary definition of alignment provides three distinct meanings:

- linear or orderly arrangement: the arrangement of something in a straight line or in an orderly position in relation to something else;
- positioning of something for proper performance: the correct position or positioning of different components with respect to each other or something else, so that they perform properly;
- support or alliance: support for, or a political alliance with, a person, group, argument, or point of view.

Extending this definition to quality assurance reviews suggests three possible alignment types: linear alignment; nested alignment; contiguous alignment (see Figures 1-3). Linear alignment implies that there is a direct relationship between review methods in an ordered fashion: that the outcomes from one process serve as inputs into another process. In Figure 1, the sum of the individual outcomes for programme performance contributes towards the school performance, and the sum of the outcomes of the performance of all schools contributes to an understanding of the university performance.



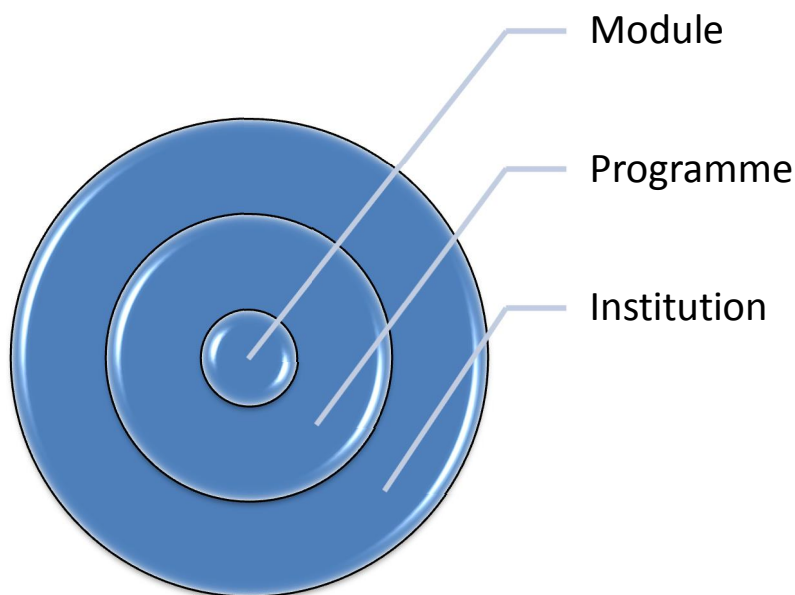
Linear alignment can work from bottom up or top down or imply no hierarchy at all. Linear alignment can be vertical or horizontal.

Figure 1: Linear alignment



Nested alignment is similar to linear alignment in that there is a direct relationship between the levels or layers, but the key difference is that there is a hierarchy implied in the ordering. Each layer contains all the previous layers, or is contextualised by them. For example, Figure 2 suggests that the module is a function of the programme to which it belongs which, in turn, is a function of the institution and must operate within the expectations, standards and culture of the institution.

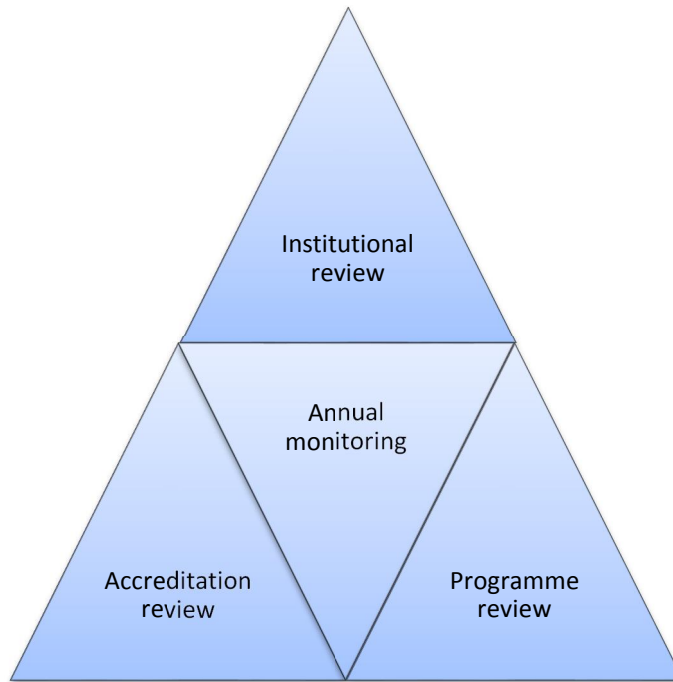
Figure 2: Nested alignment



Finally, contiguous alignment implies the coexistence of different review methods that work alongside each other and contribute collectively towards achieving the same overall objective. There may be no direct relationship between them (as in the case of external institutional review and accreditation review in the UK), but they operate in harmony and in cognisance of the each other's role.

Aligning internal and external review methods in one or more of these ways assists in providing a clear focus and purpose to each method. Each type of alignment will now be discussed using an example from the University of Edinburgh.

Figure 3: Contiguous alignment



Examples of alignment of internal and external methods from the University of Edinburgh

1. *Alignment of internal programme reviews with external institutional review (nested alignment)*

In the Scottish context all institutions are subject to Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) by QAA (Scotland) every four years. QAA appoints a peer review panel and conducts a two-part visit to the institution. The institution is required to submit a self-evaluation document and other evidence in advance of the review. In addition, a key part of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland is that all institutions conduct institution-led quality reviews. These are reviews at the programme/subject level. Whilst these reviews are managed by the institutions, they must adhere to guidelines set by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) in terms of review cycle, scope, externality among other aspects. Review schedules must be agreed with SFC and permission must be granted from SFC to conduct a review outside agreed schedules. Outcomes from reviews are reported to SFC and QAA annually and published on the University website. Effectiveness of internal review is checked in ELIR.

In addition to the expectations set externally, the University also has established its own internal expectations for internal reviews. Reviews should assure academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. This is supported by the external examiner system that operates in parallel to internal review and the external accreditation process. Reviews should enhance the quality of the student experience, encourage and support efforts to reflect critically on practice, promote dialogue on areas



in which quality might be improved, identify good practice for dissemination, and deliver value back to the review area

The University aligns internal and external expectations through the internal review remit as follows:

- Standard remit
 - This aligns with the external quality assurance framework set by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK and Scottish Funding Council expectations.
- University remit items
 - This is reviewed annually to ensure that all internal reviews take into account key strategic learning and teaching priorities from the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee. A recent priority focused on the quality of feedback given to students on their academic performance. The current priority is academic community to support student learning. Inclusion of these strategic priorities in programme reviews enables the issues to be explored within and across programmes to build both subject-level and institution-level understanding.
- College remit items
 - The University is organised into three Colleges (Science and Engineering; Humanities and Social Sciences; Medicine and Veterinary Medicine). Each College has the opportunity to submit its own remit items in relation to the specific learning and teaching priorities that may reflect pedagogical differences across the colleges. For example, the College of Medicine currently emphasises the development of professionalism among graduates, whereas the College of Humanities and Social Sciences emphasises student engagement in learning.
- School/programme remit items
 - These are remit items suggested by the school or subject area that is being reviewed. Remit items can relate to a specific programme or to a wider subject area/discipline or School. From the School/programme perspective, this represents the value-added to the school. It is the space in the review where the School is asked to reflect on what they would like to get out of the review and where they feel they would like to focus attention with a view to enhancement. The benefit is that issues/problems are initiated by the Schools and they take much more ownership of the process. Some Schools recently have used this as a space to focus on how to improve skills development in the curriculum to enhance and support student learning (such as academic literacy), other reviews have used it to focus on understanding how to develop new assessments.
- Student remit items
 - Issues that students would like the review to address in relation to the student experience. Issues that affect the student learning experience that have recently been suggested by students include student support, skills development and personal and career development.

The current institutional review method in Scotland (ELIR) now invites institutions to reflect on what they wish to get out of the review process.

2. Alignment of internal teaching programme reviews with external professional body review/accreditation



In the UK, accreditation is largely voluntary. With the exception of a small number of professional degrees (such as medicine, law, education, architecture etc.) that are required to be accredited in order for graduates to practice in the respective profession, the majority of accreditations by other professional bodies serve as an additional confirmation of the quality of the programme, but also act as a useful benchmark for curriculum content. Over 40 separate professional, regulatory or statutory bodies accredit around 140 of the University's degrees.

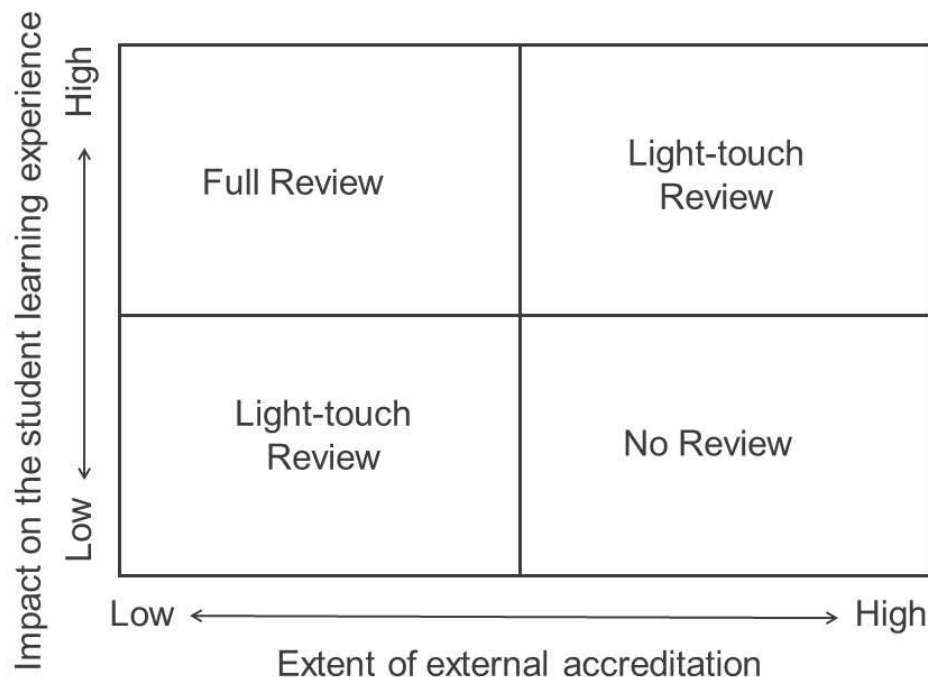
Two examples of alignment have been used to date: linear alignment of review schedules and contiguous alignment of the scope and purpose of the review.

- Alignment of review schedules (linear alignment)
 - Where possible, this involves organising the internal review in the same or consecutive year of the accreditation review. The rationale is largely one of efficiency in that both review methods can draw on the same evidence base and re-use materials. At the same time, though, it also allows for enhanced effectiveness of the review as, typically, recommendations made by an accreditation review can be used as inputs into an internal review. This allows the recommendations to be strengthened and to be addressed as part of the internal review whilst taking into account the wider context of the institution.
- Re-focused scope and purpose of internal review (contiguous alignment)
 - This allows the focus of internal review to be restructured based on the focus and purpose of the accreditation review. For example, our medical degree is accredited externally by the General Medical Council (GMC). The GMC sets the knowledge, skills and behaviours that medical students learn at UK medical schools: the outcomes that new UK graduates must be able to demonstrate. It also sets standards for teaching, learning and assessment. These outcomes and standards are articulated in *Tomorrow's Doctors*¹. The GMC is arguably more concerned with product than process. Consequently, we re-focused the scope and purpose of our internal review to focus on those aspects that the GMC is less concerned about – the student learning process and how students were supported in achieving the required outcomes and competences.
- Alignment of internal support service reviews with external support service accreditation (contiguous alignment)
 - In recent years the SFC has set specific expectations for the review of the strategic and operational aspects of student support services in relation to the student experience. Student support has always featured as part of the academic reviews, but the University also conducts specific reviews of centrally provided student support services (i.e. careers service, computing, library, accommodation etc.). To ensure efficiency and effectiveness of reviews, the breadth and depth of the review is determined by two primary factors: the impact of the support service on the student learning experience and the extent of relevant external accreditation. All services undertake an annual monitoring review, but the extent of periodic review is determined by the matrix illustrated in Figure 4. All services deemed to have a high impact on the student learning experience (such as the careers service, computing and library services) undergo a periodic review. However,

¹ http://www.gmc-uk.org/Tomorrow_s_Doctors_0414.pdf_48905759.pdf

where a periodic review is undertaken externally by an accrediting body, the University provides an internal light-touch review and draws on the recommendations from the external review. In addition, and not included in the matrix, the University also reserves the right to conduct thematic reviews on an ad-hoc basis determined according to need. For example, recent and up-coming thematic reviews include the role of student services in supporting the student learning experience of: international students and postgraduate research students. These reviews include clusters of support services based around the specific theme, rather than reviews of the operation of a single support service. Hence, the review is entirely focused on student learning.

Figure 4: Matrix of student support service reviews



Conclusion

As we move from a focus on teaching to learning we need to reflect on the extent to which our quality assurance methods and practices do indeed assure the quality of learning, as well as the quality of teaching. This paper suggests that currently an appropriate way to achieve this is by careful alignment of internal and external review methods. External methods generally, particularly those at the institution level, are necessarily focused on standard setting, assurance of teaching quality and certain aspects associated with the student learning experience. However, internal reviews, particularly those conducted at the programme or subject level, are much more able to focus on assuring both the quality of learning processes as well as the quality of learning outcomes.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Reflect on the methods of review used in your country. To what extent do the methods assure the quality of teaching versus the quality of learning?
2. Are there other ways in which reviews could be aligned?
3. What other ways could be used to assure the quality of learning?