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### **Taking stock and looking forward**

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#### **Short bio:**

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#### **Proposal**

**Title:** Evolution of the QA Culture at One University

#### **Abstract:**

Quality Assurance (QA) at one university has evolved significantly over the past 15 years in keeping with emerging European standards, reported best practices and structured feedback from key stakeholder groups. In 2001, the QA process was focussed primarily on peer review and involved extensive information reporting. It was characterised largely as a defensive process that struggled to convince various stakeholder groups that QA provided value. In 2015, peer review is now just one element of a broader QA process that is significantly leaner, evidence based and focussed around enhancement. This extended QA process now incorporates a variety of activities including benchmarking, annual operational planning, controlled policies and procedures and performance measurement. The QA culture has evolved to become a significant agent of quality enhancement and is broadly endorsed by key stakeholder groups. This paper presents the evolution of the QA culture at one large university that has contributed to a steady rise in the university's world ranking.



## **Text of paper:**

### **Introduction**

A university's primary mission is to advance and disseminate new knowledge, promote learning and critical thinking and contribute to societal development – all at the highest possible standards of quality. No two universities will achieve the same quality, but all can strive for a standard that is appropriate to the resources available – human, financial and physical. The most important resource in any university is motivated and engaged staff. Regardless of resource limitations people have the ability to identify problems and generate novel ideas that can enhance quality. They can also agree ambitious goals and lobby for the resources that need to be invested. Quality Assurance (QA) is key to providing transparency and accountability for increasingly concerned stakeholder groups (Alexander 2000).

This paper presents the evolution of the QA culture at one University from its inception in 2000. During the early years, the University followed all available European and National standards and guidelines. The initial QA culture was described by one senior manager as 'reactive' to standards and guidelines and to the perceived best practices in other universities. It was also focussed around one process - internal quality review. In 2010, the University decided to take a more 'proactive' approach to its QA processes. It recognised that raising quality standards required stronger engagement by staff. The University began changing its internal processes with a literature survey and a major survey of its key stakeholder groups. This paper focuses on the results of this stakeholder survey and the enhancements to the QA culture that have evolved from its findings.

The University used in this study was established in 1845 and currently has 17,000 students including 800 PhD enrolments. It has over 700 academic staff that publish over 2000 research papers annually. It delivers over 250 taught programmes. Immediately prior to 2010, the University was ranked at over 500th in one world university ranking. It is currently ranked at joint 250th. Greater staff engagement in quality assurance, strategic and operational planning are cited as major causes of the improvements in its ranking and other performance measures.

## Stakeholder Survey

In 2010, the University surveyed a number of key stakeholder groups to determine potential enhancements. Five major groups were identified (Figure 1):

- Quality Assurance Communities in Higher Education
- Regulatory Bodies both National and International
- Internal Academic Staff both Teaching and Support
- Senior university Management both Academic and Administrative
- External Quality Reviewers including Industry and Students

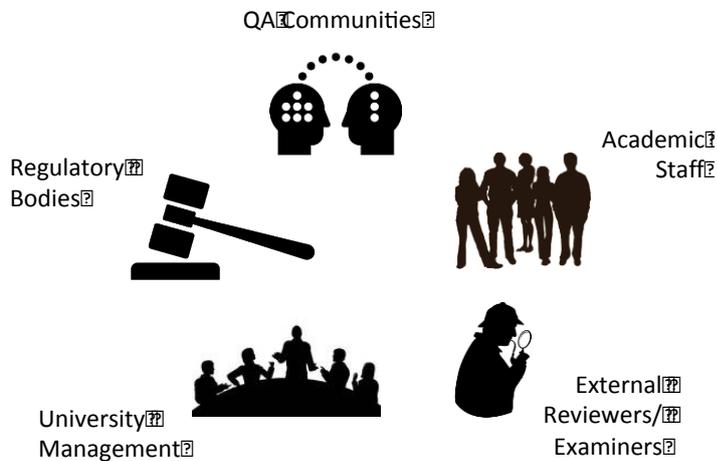


Figure 1: Key Stakeholder Groups

Three questions were explored – the strengths, weaknesses and potential enhancements that could make the QA process significantly more valuable. Two research methods were deployed - an online survey and focus groups. The online survey attracted over 200 responses. Focus group sessions were then organised using trained facilitators who used a World Café (2016) approach to generating, discussing and harvesting ideas.

University Management were surveyed using 'face-to-face' meetings that yielded a prioritised list of issues and proposed changes. The External Reviewers stakeholder group indicated their views on the QA process in over 100 Review Reports. Meetings were also arranged with national Regulatory Bodies who provided advice and guidance. Finally, the knowledge of the QA Community in higher education that provides standards and guidelines, conferences and academic journals was consulted.

## Key Survey Findings

A major task in the survey was prioritisation, merging and aggregation of the significant number of comments yielded from the various stakeholders. All stakeholder participants were asked indicate both the urgency and importance of the issues or enhancements



raised. All lists were aggregated into single prioritised list of the most important issues. Aggregated selected strengths and weaknesses are presented below for illustration.

#### Selected Strengths

- Self-assessment provides ownership and responsibility of process to units.
- Peer review is an opportunity for creating new ideas and validating existing ones.
- Review process promotes transparency and accountability.
- Review process aligns with regulatory requirements.
- Review outcome establishes a focused action plan with responsibilities.

#### Selected Weaknesses

- Significant information gathering burden and data overload.
- Difficult to engage majority of Unit staff.
- Poor alignment with strategic, operational and performance related planning.
- Positive bias is common among reviewers (i.e. "reviewers going native").
- Many processes excluded from review e.g. most of 250 taught programmes.
- Self-assessment is very inward and backward looking.
- Many recommendations compete for time and effort against operational plans.
- Self-assessments lack evidence and contain unnecessary rhetoric.
- Policies and procedures "hidden" within the minutes of academic meetings.
- Reviewers have information overload and little time to reflect.

#### QA Process Enhancements

The survey was particularly focussed on the types of enhancements that could increase the value of the QA process while also adhering to national and international standards and guidelines. For the purposes of this paper, enhancements have been divided into two sections:

- Quality Review Enhancements
- Additional QA processes

This distinction reflects a maturation of QA in higher education from a process initially focussed on internal quality review into a series of complementary processes that now mirror best practice in a wide variety of public and industrial sectors.

#### **Quality Review Enhancements**

In 2010 the focus for QA was the internal review and the QA office was set up mainly for this purpose. The Stakeholder Survey identified a number of important and urgent enhancements to the review process. Five enhancements are presented in this paper and illustrated in Figure 2.

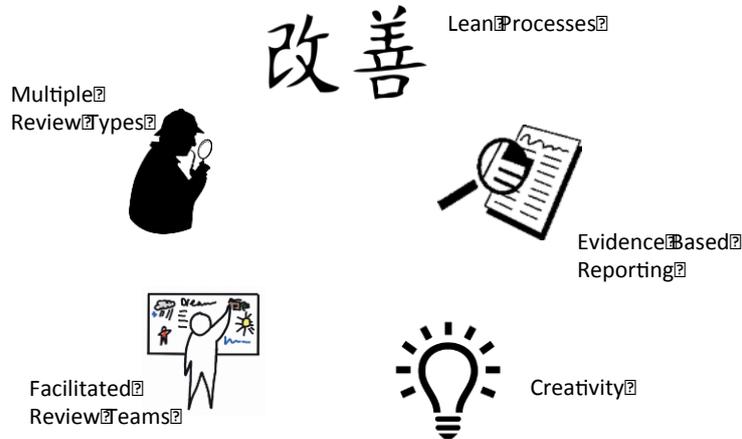


Figure 2: Quality Review Enhancements

### Lean Processes

Information burden was a major issue for units and reviewers and an impediment to focussing on evidence and potential enhancements during the review process. Two key questions were considered in the context of creating a leaner and more focussed review: the core purpose of the review and what evidence needs to be provided. A period of 'trial and error' saw a significant reduction in the information required and as a consequence a significant reduction in meeting times. The table below illustrates the kinds of reductions achieved. It's important to emphasise that the goal of 'lean' is not to reduce these measures directly, but reductions do occur as a consequence of having greater clarity of purpose and intentionally designing concise and clutter-free processes. For further discussion on lean in the higher education sector see Doman (2011), Antony (2012) and Balzer (2010).

	<b>Before 2010</b>	<b>After 2010</b>
Review Guidelines	100+ pages	12 pages
Self assessment reports	100+ pages	c.40 pages
Review visits	4.5 days	2.5 days
Reviewers report size	12 pages	c.2 pages
Reviewers report submission	20 days	Same day +
Action plans	8 pages	c.2 pages
Action plan meetings	4hrs	1hr
Review cycle	6 months	12 weeks

### Evidence Based Reporting

Related to the 'lean' initiative was the need to move from largely descriptive reporting to evidence based reporting. Depending on the type of unit being reviewed a number of core types of evidence were identified:



- University strategic plan
- Unit Operational plans
- Unit Workloads
- External examiner reports
- Student feedback surveys
- Key performance indicators
- Prior review recommendations
- Organisational structures and committees

Review process 'paperwork' was redirected from providing a large volume of curriculum and promotional data to providing evidence of current performance and action plans for improving quality.

### Creativity

Reviewers in 2010 were largely viewed by units as inexperienced auditors but who were also acknowledged as good for sharing best practices and generating ideas. The University decided to recast the role of reviewers from being assessors to becoming leading participants in an idea generation process. Their primary role during the review visit was to work with units to generate and agree ideas that would be later implemented as part of units annual operational plan.

During pre-review meetings, reviewers were strongly advised to practice creativity and idea generation. Review visit meetings were arranged to allow problems and ideas to be explored openly. This change of focus has a significant impact on the engagement by units in the review process and on the confidence of reviewers themselves regarding their contributions. For further discussion on the role of reviewers see Brennan (1994), Wicks (1992) and Patry (2012).

### Facilitated Review Teams

In 2010, review teams typically comprised external and internal peers with an internal peer acting as rapporteur. Two major issues were identified, firstly, difficulty in finding rapporteurs and secondly, review teams that sometimes felt they were unqualified to offer advice. The decision was taken to include a trained facilitator in the review team who had expertise in group mentoring and facilitation. This individual, who would be used in many quality reviews, would also build up considerable experience over time and could transfer this knowledge between review teams. This change brought considerable experience to the review team, took the focus away from the role of rapporteur and allowed other reviewers to focus more on idea generation. Units subsequently had more confidence and engagement in the review process.

### Multiple Review Types

In 2010 there were two types of review - one for academic units and one for support service units. It was clear from the Stakeholder Survey that this was not adequate for all of the possible processes that needed to be assured. Two processes in particular were inadequately reviewed - taught programmes and research quality. With 250 taught

programmes the University felt it was impossible to review all programmes without significant additional resources. Following some analysis and trial and error, the University now has five core review types:

- Unit Review
- Thematic Review
- Programme Review
- Policy Review
- Research Review

The decision around programme reviews was to have large units (i.e. Colleges or Faculties) conduct their own peer assessment 'locally' and strictly according to the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality in European Higher Education Area' (ENQA, 2015). This removed the burden of reviews from the Quality Office and insured that every programme would be reviewed at least once every seven years. The University also embarked on a comprehensive peer review of research quality. It also now conducts Policy Reviews where specific policies such as 'Student Feedback' and 'External Examination' that cut across multiple units are peer reviewed. For more detailed discussion on review types see Harrison (2014).

### Additional QA Processes

In 2010, the University also initiated a number of additional QA processes that would support raising quality standards. Five key initiatives will be described in this paper and are illustrated in Figure 3.

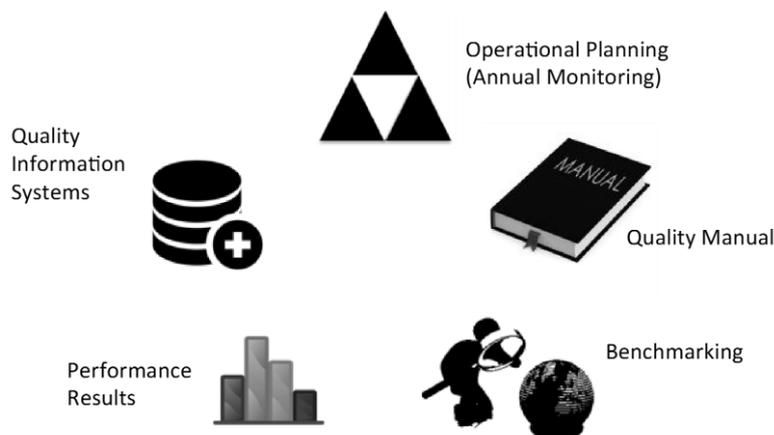


Figure 3: Additional QA Processes



## Operational Planning (Annual Reporting)

The University's strategic plan describes long-term strategic objectives, performance enhancements, quality standards and key actions and initiatives for implementation. In 2010 the University introduced unit Operational Plans defined for a one-year period that included both strategic initiatives and recommendations of quality reviews. Operational plans would also be informed by various stakeholder requirements including student surveys, external examiners and staff surveys. Operational Plans are in effect a comprehensive form of Annual Reporting. In keeping with the need for QA processes to remain 'lean', Operational Plans were limited to one page – devoid of rationale, justification or clarification. They would become 'living documents' that outlined specific initiatives for enhancing quality and performance. For more discussion on operational plans in Universities see Stoeniu (2009). See also Kettunen (2011) for a related discussion on strategy and quality maps in higher education.

## Quality Manual

Quality is a standard of performance when compared for example with 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ENQA, 2015). In 2010, the University decided to formalise all of its internal activities into controlled internal standards and guidelines or policies and procedures (P&P). P&Ps are agreed standards of performance that transform informal behaviours, routines and norms into formally assured standards of quality. When approved, the P&Ps would be stored centrally in a so-called Quality Manual or central repository. P&Ps have a number of key features:

- Well written and unambiguous in order to establish norms of behaviour
- Well structured to allow effective communication and implementation
- Stored centrally to allow easy access by end users
- Version controlled to allow for continuous enhancement

Well-developed P&Ps assure consistent implementation and compliance, foster continuous enhancement and also minimise risk. The Quality Manual provided a 'one stop shop' for guiding academic and administrators on how to implement quality policy on a wide range of issues. The University current now has over 200 P&Ps formally documented and controlled. For more discussion on Quality Manuals in higher education see Hamilton (1995) and Grimes (2004).

## Benchmarking

Benchmarking is an on-going, systematic process for measuring and comparing work processes of one organization to those of another in order to identify best practices (Shafer 1992). Two types of benchmarking were formally introduced in 2010 into QA processes for all units:

- Process Benchmarking
- Performance Benchmarking



All units were incentivised as part of their periodic quality review to undergo a benchmarking exercise. Process benchmarking required that staff physically travel to Universities abroad with whom they could compare quality. Units could also opt for 'desk based' performance benchmarking where they compared mainly bibliometric and other statistical data. Funding was provided centrally to support benchmarking in exchange for a brief report focussed on the key actions identified from the exercise. Benchmarking proved extremely successful in allowing units to take a more 'outward looking' approach to quality assurance. For more information on benchmarking, see also Jackson (2000) and Epper (1999).

### Performance Monitoring

Quality assurance ultimately relies on specific performance measures being achieved. The implicit understanding is that if performance improves then so too does 'relative quality'. In 2010, the University broadened the role of its Institutional Research office to provide to specifically provide quality and strategy related data to both units and reviewers. Units were provided with regular key performance data around teaching and research performance. This data were provided in an open online database called the 'Academic Manual' so that internal benchmarking could also take place among units. See Cave (1997) for a discussion on the challenge to quality of performance indicators.

### Quality Information Systems

Information systems (IS) are ubiquitous and have many benefits including the potential to significantly improve communication and enhance office efficiencies. Between 2010 and 2015, a number of key information systems were deployed that had significant impact on creating a leaner and more efficient QA process. The following information systems are now core to the activities of QA at the University.

- Quality Office Web Site
- Quality Office Intranet
- Quality Manual
- Academic Manual
- Cloud Based File Sharing

The Quality Office Intranet, designed using MS Sharepoint™ is an online IS for (i) Reviews, (ii) Reviewers, (iii) External Examiners, (iv) P&P Register; (v) Leads & Contacts; (vi) Reviewer Feedback and more. The Quality Manual is an online IS of over 200 controlled P&Ps used across the University. The Academic Manual is a database repository of all key performance data for all academic units across the University. Finally, the utility of cloud based file-sharing software such as Dropbox™ and Google Drive™ cannot be understated. The QA office uses these file sharing processes for exchanging almost all documents and dramatically reduces effort when uploading, sharing and controlling documents among different stakeholder groups.



## Conclusions

This paper presented a number of enhancements to the QA process at one University, which were developed in response to a major survey of stakeholders. Reflecting back, the enhancements were very broadly accepted, principally because the various stakeholders were themselves party to creating the enhancements and also largely benefited from them. There were of course major challenges and these are implicit in the key stages listed below:

- Establishing urgency around the need for change e.g. reducing effort
- Getting support and buy-in from senior managers e.g. increasing quality
- Conducting survey and identifying key change levers or new processes
- Maintaining comprehensive communication and engagement e.g. committees
- Effective implementation of key processes, starting with the easy ones
- Continuously reminding colleagues of the new culture e.g. use of QIS
- Remaining focussed on the need for improving both quality and performance

In recent years the QA Office asked reviewers and Units to comment on the QA processes. Their feedback strongly endorses the changes made. A sample of comments are given below, most of which are taken directly from publically available documents.

### Selected Comments from Reviewed Units:

- "The (QA) process worked very well and was much more streamlined than on last occasion" (2014).
- "Benchmarking visits were an invaluable aspect of the self-assessment process" (2013).
- "Recommendations were very well targeted and will be a great help to our operational planning" (2012).
- "Delighted to work with reviewers during benchmarking (prior to review visit)" (2015).
- "Recommendations ... were very useful. (Integration with the) operational plan with timelines and responsibilities will ensure implementation of recommendations" (2015).

### Selected Comments from Reviewers:

- "Our experience was that the Quality Review process in itself was excellent as clear key (enhancement) themes emerged organically and coherently" (2015).
- "Comprehensive, clear and metric-supported Self-Assessment Report (2014).
- "The presence of the (Review Team) Facilitator was considered valuable and added insight and a different perspective" (2015).
- "Streamlined process, extremely efficient" (2014).

Further new enhancements are envisaged in the future. The quest for more evidence-based reviews and skills around action planning remain a key focus i.e. translating recommendations into effective new processes. Skills in use of student feedback, external examiner reports, national student surveys and staff surveys also need to be continuously



strengthened. Improving skills around operational planning, project management, leading teams, discussing failures openly, risk management, evaluating staff and monitoring progress provide new challenges for continuously enhancing the quality assurance culture.

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