

Can we make the bureaucracy of monitoring the quality of a University's Learning and Teaching more acceptable?

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Abstract

There has been, and remains, much criticism of the monitoring of the quality of universities' learning and teaching, largely on the grounds that it is essentially a bureaucratic exercise involving the collection of data that does little, if anything, to help in improving or enhancing the learning and teaching. While recognising the force of this criticism, monitoring of quality does not have to be bureaucratic, the monitoring of quality provides valuable national and international benchmarking which can be related to enhancement if incorporated into a university's own procedures. This case study highlights one institution's attempt to reduce the apparent bureaucracy of a major aspect of its quality assurance procedures whilst emphasizing the benefits of professional quality officers and academic staff working together.

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Universities and other institutions of higher education have always been concerned about the quality of their work - whether in research or in teaching their students - and have been anxious to ensure that the quality is as high as possible. In the UK when the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 established Higher Education Funding Councils with responsibility for securing "that provision is made for assessing the quality of education" provided in universities, considerable activity was triggered nationally in the field of 'quality'. This activity included, for example, institutional audits and subject reviews introduced by a central body, in the UK the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) established to be responsible for monitoring 'quality'. Ultimately they also developed the 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education'. Quality gained further prominence through the development of the 'Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European HE Area' and the need for institutions to benchmark local developments against not only national but European frameworks. In the UK prominence of the National Student Survey and the introduction of student fees raised the profile yet further by increasing public and political interest in the quality of the provision provided by institutions.

Two of the main criticisms of the more explicit quality assurance processes introduced as a result of these developments were first a perception of increased unnecessary bureaucracy and secondly the introduction of a new breed of university administrators 'the quality officers'. In this paper it is argued that both developments were steps in the evolution of the effective assurance of the quality of the student learning experience but it needed to become something which was a routine part of the academic work of an institution and key to ensuring systematic enhancement.

Since the introduction of the national and European quality frameworks referred to above and external interest in institutions quality assurance, much of what has been written by the academic community has been critical. From the beginning it was seen by many academics as bureaucracy devised by quality officers involving the collection of data and general checking largely for its own sake. The

introduction of many quality assurance procedures was seen as taking up valuable time that would be better spent on work with students or in doing research. Writing in January 2005, Alison Wolf, a professor of management at King's College, London, made clear her frustration at having to spend a day on forms designed to satisfy the QAA.

“Given the consensus that most QAA demands are a waste of space and the supposed move to a “lighter touch” regime, you might expect a decline in meaningless form-filling. On the contrary. In every institution I know, it continues apace: a defensive exercise in providing, on paper, every assurance and statistic and policy declaration that could possibly be imagined”. (Wolf, 2005, p.13).

Such criticism was not limited to the UK. The European University Association's survey of a sample of higher education institutions in 29 countries in 2004/5 (Reichert and Tauch, 2005) showed that in many of them external quality assurance tended to be seen as a bureaucratic burden of only limited use for development.

A major criticism of the quality assurance arrangements introduced in many institutions was that the emphasis was simply on getting good results by whatever means. It was argued that part of the problem was the emphasis on the simple measurable performance indicators, such as data which fed into determining the positions in league tables. This often became referred to as 'bean counting' and encouraged institutions to manipulate data to meet targets (Harvey, 2002). Hence, while the main purpose of monitoring quality and performance should be to act as a catalyst for enhancement of the student experience, this was not always what was seen to be happening in practice. What we began to see was improvement in quality assurance processes and in those activities where performance could be measured against simple targets rather than improvement and enhancement of actual learning and teaching.

There is little point in denying, or ignoring, the criticisms like those outlined above. It must be accepted that many academic staff in universities were and remain suspicious of anything associated with the monitoring of 'quality' which they perceive as having little to do with improving the standard of the university's work. The monitoring of the quality of a university's learning and teaching has to be more inextricably linked in practice with the continual work of enhancing that learning and teaching.

If we are to improve the situation the starting point must be within an institution - with an institution's own structures and procedures for maintaining confidence in the quality of its work. The European

University Association's survey, referred to above, points to the importance of a "well developed internal quality culture" (Reichert and Tauch, 2005, p.30). However, such internal procedures must recognise the existence of the external context and incorporate it using the information it provides.

Another common criticism relates to the posts associated with 'quality' created in universities since the early 1990s. Academics' suspicion of 'quality' can extend to suspicion of the motives of people involved in quality assurance, even those quality officers within their own institution. The posts associated with quality assurance were often filled by people who did not see themselves as part of the academic community but as part of 'the management'. Their main concern was with external monitoring in order to get good results. To this end they concentrated on accountability and the procedures for monitoring but in so doing, it is argued, "they forfeit the prospect of engaging in innovative or quality enhancement-orientated work". (Newton, 2002, p.47). This again was not inevitable (Hodgson & Whalley, 2006, p.509) and a case study to show how a change was effected is given below..

A case study of a development in one institution to reduce perceived bureaucracy

For many years the University of Leeds undertook a range of separate and distinct activities all intended to assure the quality of its provision. Separate procedures which were of particular relevance to this case study were:

- i) consideration of student feedback from internal surveys,
- ii) consideration of data from the National Student Survey
- iii) consideration of statistics on student performance,
- iv) feedback from external examiners,
- v) module and programme review
- vi) the procedures for the amendment of modules,
- vii) operation of staff student committees.

Each activity had been introduced by the institutional quality officers in response to the need to meet a particular external requirement and individually each was in accordance with national and European frameworks. The procedures were regarded as being owned by the quality officers and as imposed on the academic community. As each procedure developed and evolved locally there was increasing overlap between them.

In 2007 a new Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning & Teaching (PVC) was appointed who worked with the senior quality officer to stress the importance of true partnership between academic and professional staff and led from the front on effecting a cultural change which allowed the strengths of different participants to be used in a collaborative way. One example of this in practice was discussion involving the quality officers and the academic community on the quality assurance procedures and consideration as to whether they remained appropriate.

In assessing the effectiveness of the arrangements the need for effective quality assurance was not questioned but the following particular concerns about the particular processes adopted were identified:

- The local differences in the processes meant that the institution was finding it increasingly difficult to be confident of the quality of provision in all of its 28 schools. The institution was having to monitor over 500 different programme reviews and NSS data at programme level for 400 programmes.
- There was a recognised need to look more holistically at the student experience, involving both curricular and school-led co-curricular activities.
- Although completing surveys and having places on all committees students were increasingly becoming disengaged from the real activity to enhance their experience.
- The processes encouraged superficiality in considering student feedback with little discussion with students on underlying concerns.
- The processes included no element of risk analysis with every programme being treated in the same way. This was resulting in some schools in weak processes to address potential high risk activities and in other schools excessive processes across all activity.
- Academic staff were ensuring they completed the paper work but there was little evidence of the reflection which this should represent.
- Lack of linkage between the quality assurance processes and the financial and strategic planning of the institution at all levels.

The PVC asked a small team of quality officers and senior academic staff to work in partnership to develop a single standard process. The objectives of the new process were:

- to combine and refresh the quality assurance activities in such a way as to facilitate effective but proportionate consideration,
- to align the quality assurance activities with the institutional planning processes,
- to bring consistency to the way in which students are engaged in the discussions and the outcome is made available to students,
- to ensure that the quality assurance could lead to systematic enhancement,
- to ensure processes meet external requirements.

The discussion resulted in the process described in table 1

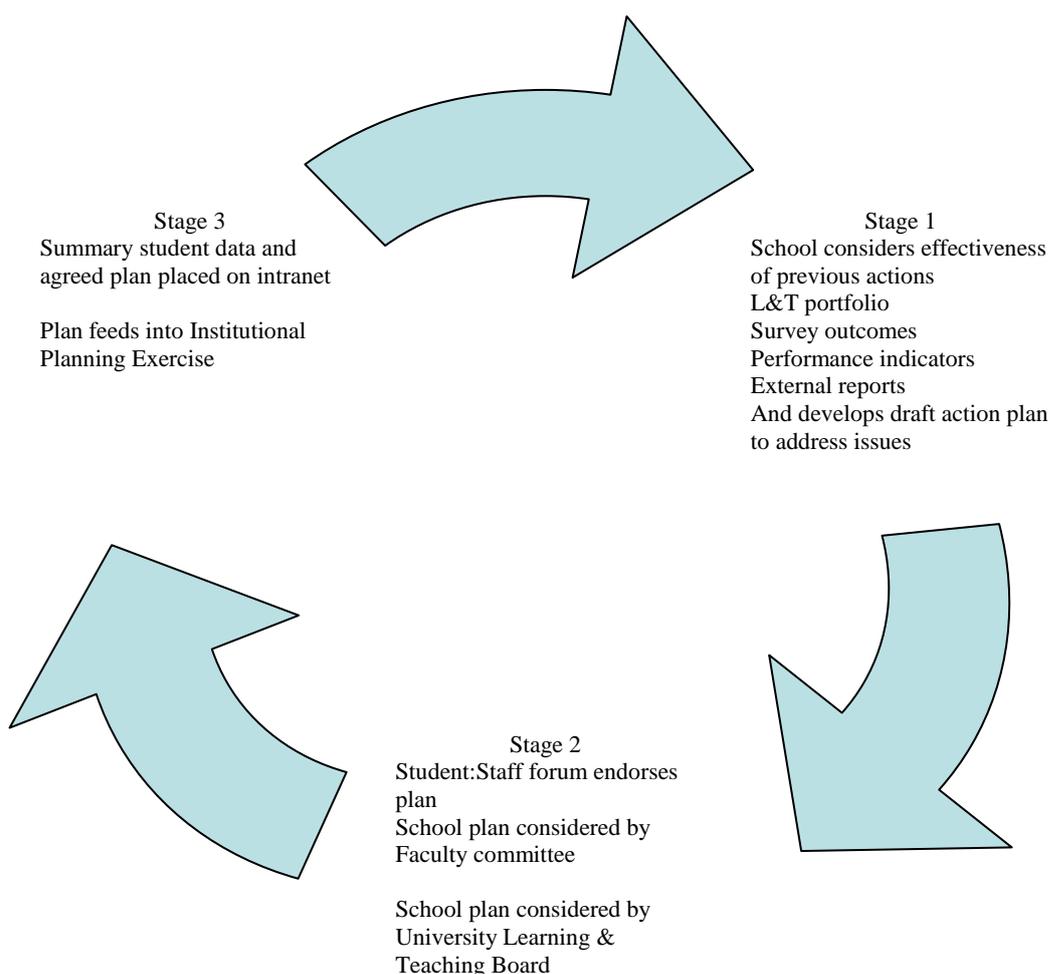


Table 1: revised quality assurance cycle for the annual review of provision

Schools were required as stage 1 to undertake a review of the information relating to their whole portfolio of learning and teaching activity including management information, both qualitative and quantitative. Based on this Schools developed an action plan to address any issues identified. This

approach allowed a School to identify common themes across their programmes which needed to be addressed and also to identify any programmes where there were specific issues needing special interventions. A simple template for the action plan was prepared by the quality officers.

Aspect	Issues raised in 2008-09 feedback	Planned response in 2009-10
Overall satisfaction		
Teaching & assessment		
Academic support		
Organisation & management		
Learning resources		
Personal development		

Table 2 – action plan template

As a key part of stage 2 of the process students in the School were consulted on the proposed action plan through their student:staff forum. As well as ensuring students were engaged with the process of considering the development of their programmes this also ensured that the School could test with its students that the proposed actions did in fact address the issues raised through student feedback. The action plan was then further developed and any changes made before it was submitted to the faculty committee. All the action plans for the University then formed the agenda for a special meeting of the University's senior committee responsible for learning and teaching. This committee considered each plan in detail and agreed that the actions were appropriate or sent the plan back to the School for further work. The plans were then put on a web site which is accessible to students from the relevant School and students were alerted to its presence. The detailed plans also fed into the University's institutional planning exercise.

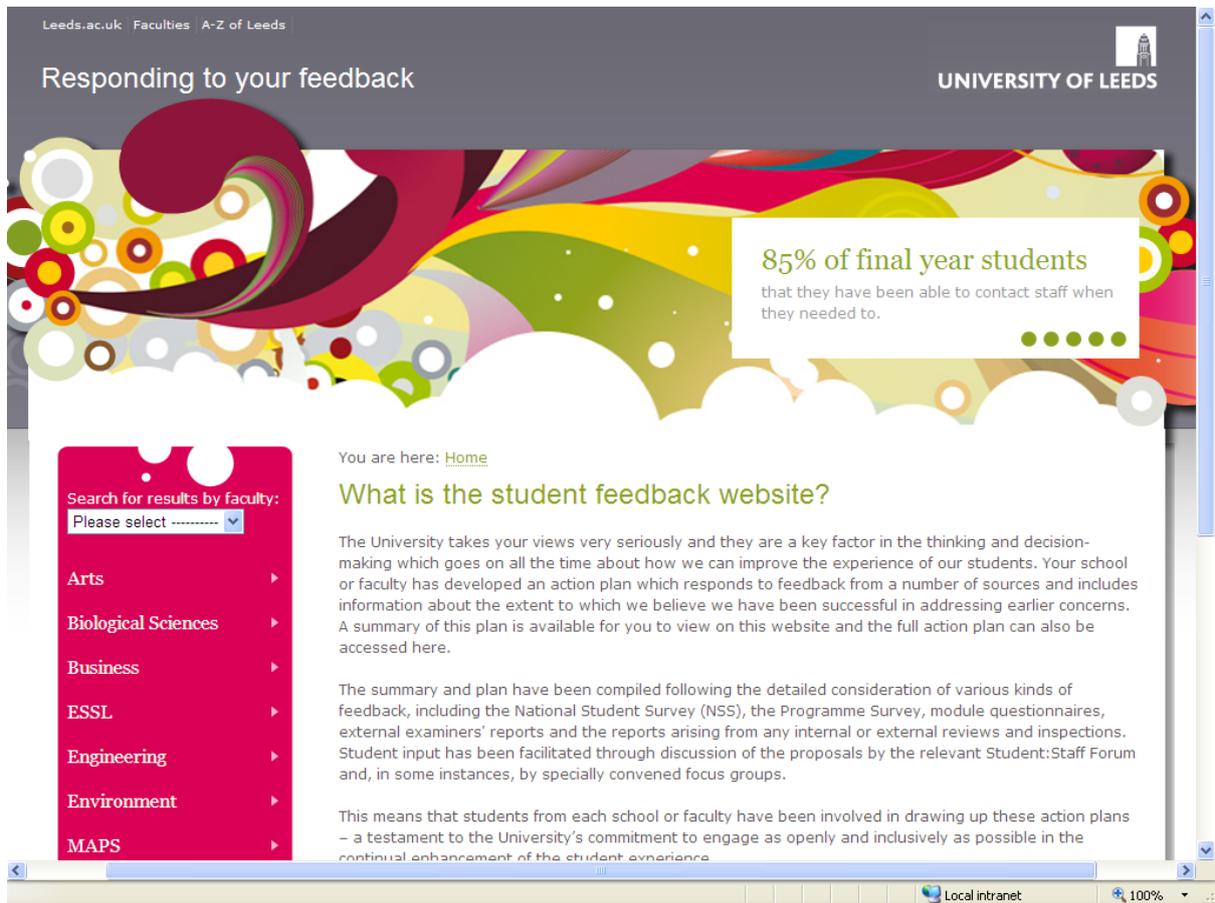


Table 3 – screen shot of the Responding to your feedback web site

After the first two cycles of operation the process was evaluated. It was agreed that the new arrangements were largely meeting the objectives. The evaluation evidence suggested that the new process was being positively received by academic staff because the value of completion of the plans was clear and the reporting seen as proportionate. There was also engagement with the process at the highest levels in the institution and for the first time there was appropriate holistic information on the provision of each School which could feed directly into the planning exercise. The students' views sought through the Student Union, were extremely positive both in relation to the process and the output.

There were some suggestions as to how the process could be improved and the following amendments were agreed:

- provision of an executive summary for the benefit of students together with ready access to the headline data (table 4),

Table 4 – Example of an executive summary of an action plan

Aspect	Student Surveys					
	2008-09		2007-08		2006-07	
	School	Uni	School	Uni	School	Uni
Overall satisfaction	92	84	95	85	93	82
Teaching	94	86	93	85	94	83
Assessment & feedback	76	61	75	60	71	55
Academic support	82	75	81	74	77	70
Organisation & management	87	79	90	78	90	74
Learning resources	86	86	89	88	87	86
Personal development	72	78	76	76	75	74

Impact of 2007-08 actions	1. Modifications to our exam/assessed work feedback system have clearly been well received; 2. Arrangements made for induction week have had a positive impact; 3. Away Day sessions gave all colleagues food for thought on how to improve student confidence; 4. There has been a 9% increase (79% to 88%) in positive responses on assessment and marking - a reflection on the improved procedures introduced via the VLE; 5. Students like the release of module mark breakdown via the VLE; 6. Good reception for feedback on office hours/dissertation mentoring/exam performance delivered by PT.
Achievements in 2008-09	1. An improvement in how students rate us in terms of assessment and feedback; 2. Excellent results on teaching across the board; 3. We have beaten Sheffield from joint second into third place in terms of 'overall satisfaction'; 3. Continued commendation across the board from our external examiners for quality of teaching and supervision; 4. Improvements in every area in UPES; 5. Overall satisfaction for TPG now at 100%; 6. Excellent teaching results in NSS and UPES; 7. Improved PT arrangements clearly reflected in returns; UPES returns on Learning Resources and Personal Development have improved.
Main actions for 2009-10	1. Initiate a further drive to improve the quality and usefulness [and timeliness for TPG] of feedback; assess as far as data permits the effectiveness of and student reaction to alterations in the timing of submissions; 2. Sharper distinction to be drawn between the nature and purpose of teaching between school/college and university during induction and subsequently; 3. Further exploitation of the VLE for purposes of teaching and assessment; 4. Encourage and facilitate social contact between History 'peers'; 5. Revision and expansion of marking criteria; 6. Highlight Leeds for Life initiative; monitor and develop the School's 'communication plan'; 6. Explore possibility of a library session for level 2 students; encourage staff to digitise resources; 7. Pursue initiatives to enhance students' employability; strengthen links with Careers Centre.

- A column added to the action plan template for Schools to reflect on the effectiveness of actions already undertaken (see table 4)
- Where performance was seen to be good Schools were encouraged to identify good practice which could be shared with other Schools. This led to the development of a new web site

called Casebook where examples of effective practice identified by Schools could be shared.



Table 5 – screen shot of the Casebook website

- In order to ensure that the plans remained living documents throughout the year it was agreed that each School should be visited by a team from the faculty, including a student representative. The team would have an informal discussion about progress and also seek to further ensure that actions and practices which had been effective were shared.
- Whilst acknowledging the importance being placed on the data externally by students in particular in relation to the NSS, for example through links from the national admissions site, staff were reminded that it was intended that the data should be used as only one of the indicators of students' views. The data should form the basis of discussions with students to better understand any areas for development.

In order to deliver a development like the one referred to above an institution needs professional quality officers who understand the needs of the institution and are able to reference any development in the external context thus ensuring that university-wide requirements adhere to

external frameworks, working with academic staff who understand the idiosyncratic features of the different disciplines in the institution and how information might best be used to enhance provision. At the University of Leeds this joint working has been viewed as extremely positive in developing a 'one university' approach to developments.

In considering a new development like the one above it is vitally important that the quality officers in institutions responsible for delivering quality assurance arrangements are not seen as 'bean counters' but are seen as working in partnership with academic staff, helping and advising them to ensure that the best outcome is achieved. They must be accepted by academics rather than being viewed by them with suspicion because they are monitoring activity. Hence, bearing in mind the prejudice they might meet initially, they must have, and be seen to have, a good knowledge and understanding of the nature of academic work and, for that matter, of academics. Ideally, they must be independent of the university's management structure in the sense that their advice and work generally must be based on academic criteria only and they must not use as the starting point management issues such as finance. The quality officers will continue to have a unique role in ensuring that the information obtained by monitoring can be used in enhancing learning and teaching and the whole student experience. They will have at their finger tips information from internal and external monitoring, and from staff, students and external examiners and be able to relate this to developments in the Learning and Teaching Support Networks, as well as the QAA, EUA and work in other institutions.

Conclusions

It is possibly unrealistic to expect all academics to accept, if not welcome, the fact that 'external' monitoring of their work will take place and that this will involve some kind of reporting. However it can be made more acceptable. Quality assurance procedures, external or internal, need to be developed collaboratively between the academic community in an institution who understand special disciplinary requirements and the professional quality officers who can bring a sense of the national and European context. They need to have clear objectives, one of which needs to be ensuring proportional bureaucracy. Then we can begin to demonstrate the Bologna Agreement's basic principle that "quality assurance for accountability is fully compatible with quality assurance for enhancement purposes" (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005, p.13). This will be the most convincing argument to ensure quality assurance becomes fully

embedded in an institutions activity.

Discussion Questions

1. Is bureaucracy inevitable when monitoring the quality of provision?
2. How can we make more explicit the link between monitoring the quality and the enhancement of learning and teaching?
3. What is stopping us sharing good practice in both how we monitor quality and enhance learning and teaching?

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