THE UK — INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION AND QUALITY

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The Context

Higher Education institutions in the United Kingdom are subject to a range of external quality monitoring procedures. These are complemented by a variety of internal mechanisms to assure quality and standards. Traditionally, British universities have had a high degree of autonomy. In the 1960s, a binary system of higher education was introduced with the development of a polytechnic sector. The polytechnics had far less autonomy: they were initially controlled by local authorities and were subject to inspections by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), in the same way as schools in the public sector. Furthermore, the polytechnics initially had no degree awarding powers, and graduates received their award from the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA).

The CNAA introduced a peer validating procedure to ensure that potential courses in the polytechnics were of an appropriate nature, based on a review procedure that examined potential curricula, syllabus content, staffing, teaching and learning methods, learning resources, and so on. This validation process, initially very inquisitorial, became slowly delegated to the polytechnics. The polytechnics became incorporated in the early 1990s, moving out of local authority control, and following the ending of the binary system in the 1990s were given degree-awarding powers. However, despite the increased autonomy of the new universities (as the polytechnics became known) they retained many of the systems that had been put in place under CNAA. Although no longer subject to HMI inspections, most new universities retained a rigorous system of periodic review and validation of courses inherited from CNAA.

With the imminent ending of the binary divide in British higher education, increasing pressure was placed on the old universities to be more accountable and open to scrutiny. Apart from HMI inspections of teacher training provision in universities, there had been no tradition of accountability in the old university sector, outside the need to demonstrate that some courses fulfilled the requirements for professional-body accreditation. First attempts to breach the closely guarded autonomy of the old universities came via the introduction of a process of Academic Audit, instituted under the auspices of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP). Academic Audit involved a review of the mechanisms within a university for assuring quality. It did not attempt to assess the quality of teaching and learning at a subject level, much less comment on the adequacy of academic standards. Academic Audit subsequently became a division of the newly created Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), wholly owned by the CVCP.

Academic Audit was an attempt to thwart closer inspectorial control of provision by external, governmental, agencies. In the event it failed and a process of Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) was introduced under the auspices of the newly constituted Funding Councils (one each for England, Scotland and Wales). TQA was subject based, involved self-assessment, peer visits and statistical indicators and included direct observation of teaching.

The Funding Councils also evaluated research, nominally to ensure that public money provided for university research was used efficiently and to best effect. The Research Assessment Exercise, a paper-based evaluation, is directly linked to the distribution of research monies and tends to occupy the (older) universities to a much larger extent than does teaching quality assessment.

The upshot of the changes in external quality monitoring in the UK in the 1990s is that institutions are faced with five main forms of external monitoring:

- academic audit of institutional quality assurance procedures;
- teaching quality assessment on a subject basis;
- research evaluation via the research assessment exercise, on a subject basis;
- professional body validation and accreditation (in some subject areas);
- inspection of teacher training provision, now under the control of the Teacher Training Agency.

In addition, UK higher education has a long tradition of external examining, in which subject peers from other universities literally examine the assessed work of students in other institutions in an attempt to maintain standards across the system. There are problems with the effectiveness of the external examining system given the enormous growth in higher education and the increasing diversification of the sector. Nonetheless, external examiners are seen as the mainstay of standards. The system is somewhat curious inasmuch as externals are invited and appointed by the universities and have no responsibility to external bodies, other than, in some cases, to professional and regulatory bodies who may also have nominated external examiners.

External monitoring in the UK is likely to go through further changes in the next few years following the creation of a new Quality Assurance Agency, charged with rationalising the work previously undertaken by the Quality Assessment Divisions of the Funding Councils and the Academic Audit division of the Higher Education Quality Council. In the wake of the Dearing Committee Report, it is also likely that the new agency will be asked to review the Research Assessment Exercise, to identify ways to enhance the external examiner system, and to ensure that quality procedures place more emphasis on academic standards. For example, the system of selecting external examiners is likely to change following the recommendation that there should be a pool of academic staff, which is recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions will be required to select their external examiners.

The emphasis of most external quality monitoring in the United Kingdom, has been on accountability rather than improvement. The HEQC has, since its inception, had a Quality Enhancement Division, but its impact has been far less profound than that of Audit, given the predominately accountability and value-for-money approach of the British Government.

Internal quality monitoring in British universities has both preceded the growth in external monitoring in the 1990s and has also responded to it. Internal validation and review, especially in the old polytechnic sector, was well-established prior to any external monitoring, which meant, for example, that those institutions already had procedures in place prior to the advent of Academic Audit.

This was not always the case with some of the older universities, who found themselves clarifying and documenting procedures for the first time when auditors were invited in to explore quality assurance processes. On the other hand, some of the external monitoring procedures have led to additional internal procedures or the realignment of internal procedures to mesh with external processes.

The following is an attempt to indicate the broad range of internal procedures currently practiced in English universities (see Newton, this volume, for detail on the situation in Wales). The University of Central England in Birmingham, one of the 'new universities', will be used as a case study. The role of student feedback in internal quality monitoring is also explored, as this is an essential item in the University's approach to quality monitoring, and an important element nationally as students are major stakeholders in higher education.

Institutional approaches to quality monitoring in the UK

Institutions collect a wide range of data about the services they provide including:

- surveys of student views;
- internal peer review of teaching;
- internal audits of quality procedures;
- external reviews of teaching and research;
- professional body scrutiny of programmes;
- surveys of recent graduates;
- employer views of graduates.

These activities generate two types of data about stakeholder views of university provision. There are :

- threshold judgements relating to standards, comparability or accountability for public funds;
- quality judgements.

Some exercises are principally designed to check that an institution's provision is of an acceptable standard or level and is comparable on a national or international stage. For example, professional body accreditation of higher education programmes, which may also, in part, be used to assess comparability with similar programmes offered within the European Community. Others are designed to elucidate quality judgements with a view to enhancing the quality of provision, for example, peer reviews of teaching designed to share good practice, or surveys of students designed to identify areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Of course, those surveys or peer reviews designed to assess standards, comparability or accountability are also likely to have a quality enhancement spin-off even if it is a secondary function.

So, one way or another, a considerable amount of data about stakeholder views is generated that is directly or indirectly designed for quality improvement purposes. Some of this information can be reassuring, some of it disconcerting.

The key question is 'What do you do with the data?'. In particular, how is the data used to change anything? How does it fit into institutional quality improvement policies and processes? To be effective in quality improvement, data collected from surveys and peer reviews must be transformed into information that can be used within an institution to effect change. Furthermore, this

information must be linked into a process of feedback and action. In short, there must be a means to close the loop between data collection and effective action.

This requires that the institution has in place a system for:

- identifying responsibility for action;
- encouraging ownership of plans of action;
- accountability for action taken or not taken;
- feedback to generators of the data;
- committing appropriate resources.

Establishing this is not an easy task, which is why so much data generated by surveys or peer reviews is not used to effect change, irrespective of the good intentions of those who initiate the enquiries. This involves encouraging a bottom-up quality improvement process alongside a top-down accountability requirement.

Management, in this approach, has six strategic functions in respect of quality improvement:

- setting the parameters within which the quality improvement process takes place;
- establishing a non-exploitative, suspicion-free context in which a culture of quality improvement can flourish;
- establishing and ensuring a process of internal quality monitoring;
- disseminating good practice through an effective and open system of communication;
- encouraging and facilitating teamworking amongst academic and academic-related colleagues;
- delegating responsibility for quality improvement to the effective units that are going to deliver continuous improvement at the staff-student interface.

Most higher education is characterised by two types of managerial structure:

- a 'collegiate' structure in which lines of accountability are diffuse and often implicit, and where academic managers are often elected;
- a hierarchical structure in which lines of accountability are focussed and explicit and professional managers are appointed.

It is potentially easier for the hierarchical structure to implement a top-down accountability system, although it is much harder for it to ensure ownership of, and involvement in, the quality improvement process, rather than mere compliance with managerial requirements. Conversely, the collegiate system would appear to be better able to encourage ownership although a real willingness to account for action may be a more difficult procedure to implement.

The University of Central England in Birmingham — a Case Study

The University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE) has an extensive set of processes and procedures for internal quality monitoring. The various procedures include:

- student feedback of the total student experience of learning at an institutional level (Student Satisfaction);

- monitoring of teaching quality at a faculty level (using peer review, self assessment and student feedback) linked to individual performance review (IPR);

- accreditation and validation of programmes of study (including employer and professional body feedback where appropriate);

- approval, registration and examination of research degree students;

- internal audits of aspects of university regulations and practices;

- annual monitoring reports from programmes of study, including module-level feedback from students;

- receipt and review of reports of external examiners and moderators;

- faculty-level monitoring of services guaranteed in Student Charters;

- evaluation of research development, monitoring the expenditure of money obtained via the Research Assessment Exercise.

The approach goes well beyond that used in most universities in Britain and other countries. In a recent external audit of its quality assurance procedures (HEQC, 1995, p. 32) UCE was commended for the extent, clarity and rigour of its processes. So extensive is the quality monitoring at UCE that the HEQC Academic Audit report cautions about proliferation and suggests that, despite the consultation and carefully planned introduction of quality monitoring procedures, the university might 'consider the advisability of keeping under careful review the increasing scale and complexity of internal quality assurance monitoring arrangements at all levels of the institution'. During the audit, the team of auditors advanced the view that the internal system might be over-elaborate and that there appeared to be excessive monitoring. The unanimous response from those audited was that it was better to be over cautious than have an underdeveloped quality monitoring process (HEQC, 1995, p. 8).

Although the array of procedures at UCE is more than most institutions are likely to have, they do encompass the range of alternatives, relating to higher education, to be found within English universities.[1]

Information flow

There are clear lines of accountability, responsibility and information flows in the university, shown schematically on Figure 1. The way that external processes mesh with internal ones are also indicated. In a sense, however, external quality monitoring processes (EQM) add another layer to the extensive internal quality monitoring (IQM) processes and reporting procedures. The full range of external and internal procedures and their focus of attention are outlined in Figure 2.

Part of the problem with the British system of EQM is that it does not mesh well with those institutions that have well-developed IQM procedures. This, in part, is due to the EQM system being established to address the lack of explicit IQM in many institutions in Britain (especially in the older universities).
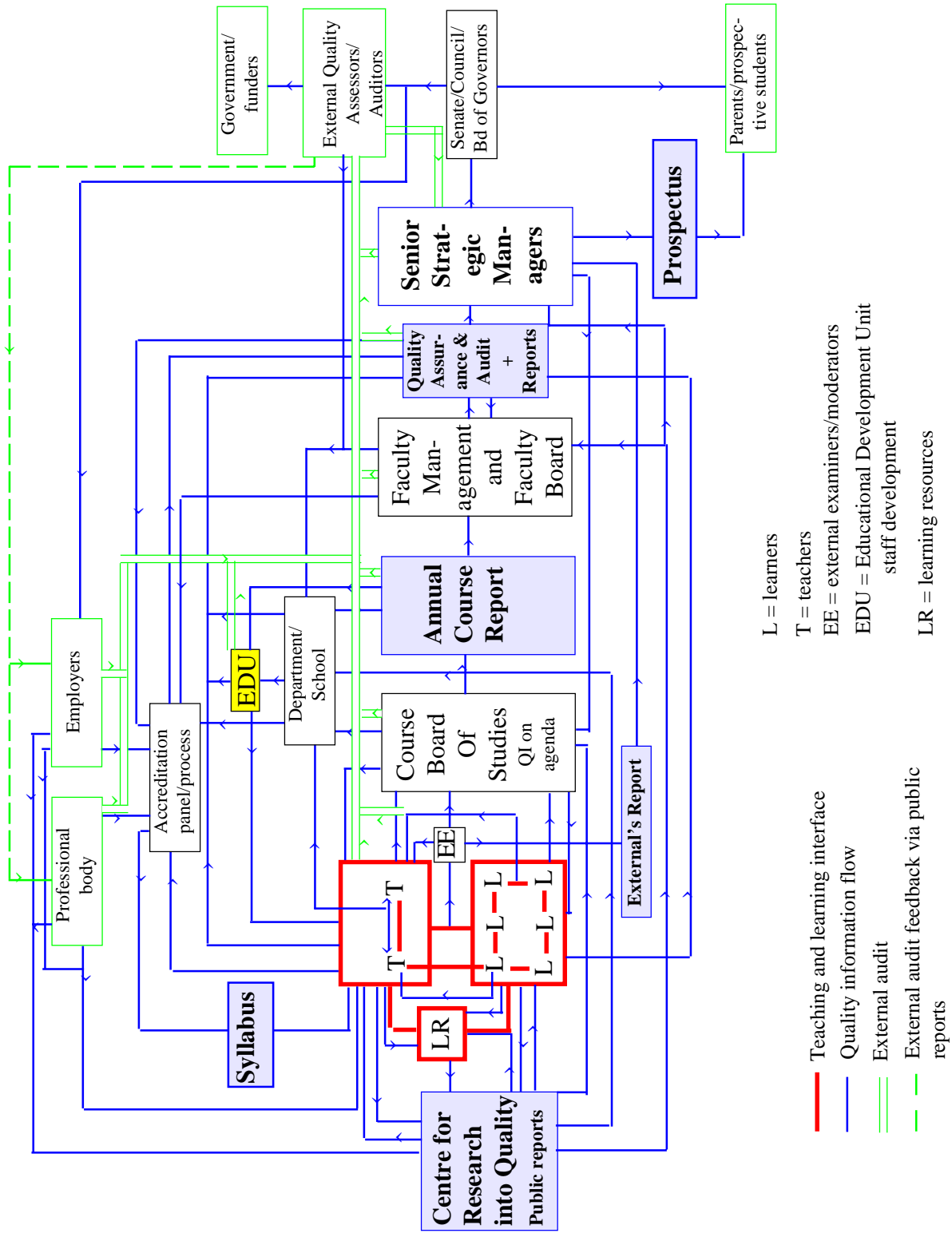
Figure 1: Information flow diagram at UCE

Government/funders

External Quality Assessors/Auditors

Senate/Council/Bd of Governors

Parents/prospective students

Senior Strategic Managers

Prospectus

Quality Assurance & Audit + Reports

Faculty Management and Faculty Board

Annual Course Report

EDU

Department/School

Employers

Accreditation panel/process

Professional body

Course Board Of Studies
QI on agenda

External's Report

Syllabus

EE

T   T

T

L – L
L – L
L – L

LR

Centre for Research into Quality
Public reports

L = learners

T = teachers

EE = external examiners/moderators

EDU = Educational Development Unit
staff development

LR = learning resources

—— Teaching and learning interface

—— Quality information flow

==== External audit

– – – External audit feedback via public
reports

Figure 2: Internal and external quality monitoring procedures at UCE

Level	*Type*	*Responsibility*	*Focus*
External	Teaching quality assessment	HEFCs QACs	Cognate subject area
	Research assessment exercise	HEFCs	Subject areas
	Professional accreditation	External professional body	Profession
	Quality audit of assurance systems	HEQC	Institution-wide (audit trails)
	External examiner system	HE Institution	Course/programme of study: assessment
In theory	*Judicial review*	*Legal system*	*Student assessment or complaint*
Internal – institution/faculty	Institutional audits	Quality Assurance and Audit Unit (QAA)	Library, examiners, placement assessment, etc.
	Student Satisfaction	Centre for Research into Quality	Institution-wide student views
	Staff Satisfaction	Centre for Research into Quality	Institution-wide staff views
	Individual personal review (IPR)	Faculties	All aspects of employment
	Teaching evaluation	Facultiues (using peers/ inspectors, self assessment)	Assessment of teaching ability
	Student evaluation of teaching	Faculty	Student view of teacher performance
	Staff development	Educational Development Unit or faculties	Individual, research, teaching, job-related
	Complaints procedure	Senate sub committee	Harassment, unfair treatment, etc.
	Appeals procedure	Senate sub committee	Student assessment: procedures, medical
	Accreditation and periodic review of programmes	Faculties (with guidance from QAA)	Programme content, resources, t&l etc.
	Student representation	Student Union	Representatives on Senate etc.
Internal – course/programme	Annual course review	Course director/lecturers	Overview/self-assessment of the course
	Formal student feedback	CD/lecturers/students	Questionnaires (course or unit); evaluation session
	External examiner reports	External examiner	Course content, student performance, arrangements
	Student representation	Elected students	Representatives on Boards of Study etc.
	Course committees – Board of Studies, etc.	Staff (+ student reps)	Administration and overview of course
	Course meetings	Student group	Overview of course
	Informal feedback	Individual/group of students	Direct feedback on unit, in sessions or in private
	Assessment appeals procedures	Individual student	Second/third opinion (informal, formal)
	Personal tutor system	Tutor and student	First-line support and guidance system.
	Unofficial course guides (infrequent)	Students/Union	Alternative view to that in University Prospectus etc.

Principles of UCE quality assurance processes

The underlying principle of quality monitoring at UCE is the encouragement and facilitation of continuous quality improvement. The institution has a clear commitment to external as well as internal stakeholders and thus a determination to ensure that provision is continuously monitored and improved.

Key features of the quality assurance process include:

- the principle of peer review (providing inter- and intra-institutional checks);

- ensuring aims and objectives of programmes of study are specified and attained or are attainable;

- ensuring that the educational process is constantly reviewed, using, among other things, student feedback on the teaching and learning process;

- the specification of outcomes of programmes of study, and ensuring that outcomes are comparable with similar programmes;

- the encouragement of self-evaluation and the promotion of enhancement of quality by the sharing of good practice.

Responsibility for quality monitoring

Quality has a high profile at UCE and is lead and facilitated by senior managers. For example, the Vice-Chancellor takes a leading role in the monitoring of quality through receipt of external examiners' reports, the Student Satisfaction report, internal audit reports and chairing Senate.

In many instances, detailed below, quality monitoring reports are fed directly into strategic management decisions. Although much of the responsibility for action in relation to quality monitoring, and indeed much of the monitoring itself, is delegated to faculties, action that is based on IQM is directly reported to the institution senior management.

There are two central units involved in quality monitoring. The Quality Assurance and Audit (QAA) unit, which is part of Registry, has overall responsibility for accreditation, approval and review of programmes, assessment regulations and for internal academic audit (discussed below). The Centre for Research into Quality is an independent educational research centre, in part, dedicated to surveying student and staff views of the quality of UCE provision via satisfaction studies (discussed in detail below). There is also a central enhancement unit, the Learning Methods Unit, which provides staff development, initial teacher training, consultancy and facilitation of feedback from students and the development of faculty and school strategic plans and programme curricula.

External Examiners' Reports

In Britain the award of a qualification on degree and postgraduate taught programmes of study is normally the responsibility of a Board of Examiners. Guidelines produced by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principles of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP, 1989) require that the Board of Examiners include at least one suitably qualified external peer. The logic behind

the use of external examiners is that they provide comparability of standards across the system and ensure 'fairness' in the conduct of the Board. Thus, external examiners normally have the following basic roles:

- the sanctioning of assessment assignments, including examination papers, that are part of the summative assessment for the award;

- scrutiny of (at least a sample of) the assessable output of students on the programme of study and the right to suggest changes to the grades awarded;

- scrutiny of the conduct of the Examination Board and the procedures used in its deliberations.

External examiners are required to provide a written report outlining their observations, which often includes suggestions about good practice as well as issues of standards and fairness.

At UCE, the reports provided by the external examiners are sent, in the first instance, to the Vice-Chancellor and copied to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) both of whom read and annotate the reports for the attention of the dean of the appropriate faculty and the director of the programme of studies. Action is expected to be taken at the programme or faculty level to address any areas of concern raised by the external examiner.

In most cases, subject to issues of confidentiality, the external examiner reports are discussed at Faculty Boards and Programme Boards. The course director, responsible for producing an Annual Course Report, is required to give a prominent place in the report to the external examiner reports and to indicate clearly the action taken to address any concerns expressed.

The external examining system has been in place in Britain for almost a century and the use of external examiners' reports in this way predates current external quality monitoring arrangements in Britain.

Approval and review of programmes of study.

The process of accreditation and subsequent periodic review of programmes is delegated to faculties, although guided by the Quality Assurance and Audit (QAA) unit. If a school or department wishes to launch a new programme of study it must receive approval from the faculty and the university before it can be included in the faculty's strategic plan and target student numbers allocated. Senate is responsible for approving the new programme once sufficient demand and availability of resources for the proposed programme has been established by the Dean and communicated in writing to the Vice-Chancellor. A similar process is undertaken prior to re-approval or significant modification of programmes.

The usual procedure for approval of programmes is for the 'course team' to produce a detailed document outlining the rationale, demand, resource requirements (including *curriculum vitae* of the academics involved in the programme), overall aims, assessment regulations, and mode of delivery of the programme. The aims, objectives, content, teaching and learning methods, assessment procedures and expected outcomes of each element (module or unit of the programme) are described.

Programmes that are subject to a periodic review require a similar document, with an additional

section critically reviewing the previous period of operation (normally five years) and explaining what modifications are intended to ensure the programme remains up-to-date and effective.

A review panel, chaired by a member of the university from outside the faculty, is usually convened to examine the proposal. The panel includes most or all of the academics involved on the programme and invited external peers, who act as advisors, along with a representative from the QAA unit who provides procedural advice and scrutinises the process. The panel results in three outcomes: unconditional approval of the programme, approval subject to recommendations, and rejection of the programme. The recommendations are communicated to Senate who take them into account when taking a decision about approval.

External accreditation and validation by professional bodies is usually included in the panel procedures, and where appropriate members of professional bodies, practising professionals or employers are included as panel members.

This process draws very little from current external quality monitoring procedures in Britain and is based on practices established when the institution awarded degrees validated by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) (which was wound up in the early 1990s).

Internal academic audits

Internal audits take a specific theme and audit the implementation and procedures used in different parts of the university. Audits to date have included an audit of the functioning of the external examiner system, assessment of non-verbal assignments, the operation of newly introduced modular schemes, procedures and practices in the assessment of student group work, and so on. A rolling programme of audits on a projected five-year cycle is being established.

The cross-cutting audit by themes was devised as it was considered inappropriate to audit courses as this tended to overlap the processes required for periodic review and approval of courses.

The audit is undertaken by a team of three or four academic auditors usually chaired by an experienced member of staff. Given the range of audits, there is no set method for audits, although the overall methodology, relating to the appropriate conduct of audit teams and scope of audits, is set out in the *Handbook for Academic Auditors*. The terms of reference of each academic audit are set by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) including the specification of any courses that the auditors may explore.

Every audit is expected to address three dimensions;

- the student experience;
- the quality assurance systems;
- the mechanisms for quality enhancement.

Where appropriate, careful consideration is given to the procedures and regulations of the university as specified in formal university documentation, including *Academic Regulations and Policies*, the University *Statement of Purpose*, the *Management Handbook* and the *Staff Handbook*.

The primary aim of academic audit is quality enhancement, therefore close attention is paid to ensuring that good practice identified through the process is disseminated as widely as possible.

The final report of the auditors is published by the University after it has been received by Senate. The style of internal academic audits is not dissimilar to the procedure of HEQC auditors, with the exception that only a single aspect of a whole institution audit is followed in any one audit process. The internal audit follows audit trails, in a way that reflects the process undertaken by HEQC. However, the internal audit is able to be more thorough because the face-to-face auditing can be extended over a much greater period of time than can be managed in a four-day visit by external auditors.

Student feedback

The University's short Statement of Purpose has three central sections, one of which is headed 'Quality and Satisfaction', it asserts:

> The University of Central England recognises that students are its customers and that they are free to choose where they study. The University of Central England is committed to enhancing further its reputation for teaching quality as assessed by its students. This will be measured against increasing satisfaction of students and subject to external testing by academic and professional peers.

Student feedback is thus an important element of UCE's quality monitoring and the University is unique in having an institution-wide process of feedback that links directly into management strategic decision-making. This is encapsulated in the Student Satisfaction Approach (outlined below) pioneered at UCE and undertaken on an annual basis by the Centre for Research into Quality (CRQ).

There are three levels of student feedback at UCE:
- course or module feedback, which are the responsibility of individual teachers or course directors;
- teacher assessment questionnaires, which are the responsibility of faculties;
- institution-wide student satisfaction survey undertaken by CRQ.

The course or module feedback often involves questionnaires despite attempts to encourage more direct qualitative discussion between staff or facilitators and students about the content and approach in particular course units or modules.

The teacher assessment questionnaires are part of a peer and self-assessment approach to teaching quality. They are short questionnaires that focus explicitly on the performance of the teacher. They are, in some cases, used as part of the individual review of staff.

The Student Satisfaction research undertaken by CRQ goes beyond the *Statement of Purpose* by focussing on the total learning experience of students covering the complete range of student activities across all aspects of the institution rather than just student satisfaction with teaching.

Student Satisfaction approach

Student Satisfaction is characterised by combining the following elements:
- student-determined questions;
- satisfaction and importance ratings;
- management information for action.

The statistical data collected through the survey research is transformed into management information designed to identify clear areas for action (for full details of the methodology see Harvey *et al*., 1997).

It does this by identifying student satisfaction with a wide range of aspects of provision and then identifying which of those areas are important for students. The outcomes are mapped on a satisfaction and importance grid (Figure 3). Those areas that fall into Sectors E and D, high importance to students but low satisfaction are priority areas for management intervention.

The areas of concern, about which students are asked to rate their satisfaction and importance, derive from prior consultations with students. Students, in effect, determine the questions in the questionnaire on the basis of feedback from focus-group sessions (known as the Group Feedback Strategy) and from comments provided on the previous years' questionnaires.

The survey is extensive, a lengthy mailed questionnaire is sent to the term-time addresses of 5000 students (about 25% of all UCE on-site students, 1996-97).

The Student Satisfaction survey is in its tenth year and predates the development of external quality monitoring in Britain.

Stages of the Student Satisfaction cycle
The annual Student Satisfaction cycle has six main stages:

1. student determined questions — Group Feedback Strategy;
2. questionnaire to a sample of 5000 (approximately 25%);
3. analysis of results;
4. production of a report that identifies areas for management intervention;
5. consultation via the management structure to initiate action in response to student concerns;
6. feedback to students of outcomes and action.

Stage 1: Student-determined questions
The Group Feedback Strategy (GFS) uses focus groups of students to identify those elements of their experience they regard as important, which are then used as a basis for drawing up the questionnaire.

The groups are selected to reflect the variety of provision within the institution. They include groups from each of the faculties, ensuring that a representative number of full and part-time courses are selected and that undergraduate and postgraduate provision is covered.

Typical Student Satisfaction topics include: teaching staff, teaching and learning methods, course organisation and assessment, library services, computing services, refectories, accommodation, and financial circumstances.

Stage 2: Student Satisfaction questionnaire
Three kinds of questions are asked about each main topic:
- satisfaction ratings — students are asked to rate, on a seven-point scale, their satisfaction with a range of sub-topics under each main heading;
- importance ratings — students are asked to rate, again on a seven-point scale, how important the set of sub-topics are to their learning experience;

Figure 3: Satisfaction and importance grid

	Very un-satisfactory	Unsatis-factory	OK	Satisfactory	Very satisfactory
Very important	E	D	C	B	A
Important	e	d	c	b	a
Not so important	(e)	(d)	(c)	(b)	(a)

- Patterns of use of facilities — students are asked to indicate the extent of their usage of various facilities (for example, which computer operating system they use or frequency of library use, and so on). These are used to further analyse satisfaction with service provision.

Stage 3: Analysis

The data is analysed using a small set of pre-identified independent variables—faculty, mode of attendance and level of study. These are augmented, as appropriate, by another set of secondary independent variables including, faculty sub-unit, site or location of facility, year of study, age, gender, and ethnicity.

The central thrust of the analysis is to *relate the satisfaction ratings given by students to importance ratings*. The outcomes are reported in a simple, accessible manner so that faculty and service managers can easily identify those areas of concern. Thus the mean importance scores for each item are related to the mean satisfaction scores and the outcome translated into a letter, A–E, to correspond with an area on the satisfaction-importance grid (Figure 3).

Stage 4: Production of a report

The outcomes are reported to the Vice-Chancellor, Senate and the Board of Governors. They are subsequently published in an annual report (with ISBN number) and all management, academic and senior administrative staff receive a copy.

A central feature of the report are the composite rating tables for each major heading. These are accompanied by a commentary, which identifies the main issues and trends. Although the survey is based on student-determined questions, many issues recur over time so the changes over time are also reported.

Stage 5: Consultation

There is an extensive period of consultation based on the report. The Vice-Chancellor and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality) interview all the deans and heads of services about the outcomes of the report. The deans and heads of services are expected to account for any areas where students are dissatisfied but regard as important and find ways of overcoming them. Deans are required to indicate what action they are intending to take and what has happened as a result of the previous year's agenda. The replies are made available to Senate for discussion and, as Senate papers, are semi-public documents.

Before responding to the Vice-Chancellor, the faculties make use of the detailed data available from CRQ to look more closely at any Ds or Es. They also undertake local analyses.

At UCE, feeding back information on action to students is important as students need to be aware that the process includes action, that the information is collected for a purpose. However, it is difficult to feedback to students as they have very varied contact with the institution. UCE makes reports available through the Students' Union, libraries and resource centres, provides direct feedback to students through student representatives on Senate, faculty boards and course boards; publish short articles in the University and Students' Union newsletters and send out a short, newspaper-style, summary of action with the questionnaire.

Quality Culture

The Student Satisfaction approach, along with the other forms of quality monitoring at UCE, go hand-in-hand with the development of a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI). The Student Satisfaction report does not herald an annual upheaval. Rather, it identifies areas for potential action and contributes to incremental improvement — from the point of view of students.

Staff must be convinced that different aspects of quality monitoring are really part of the CQI process and not a vehicle for recrimination. In particular, any form of student appraisal of staff or the university provision can be seen as threatening and will arouse suspicion and lead to consternation unless the aims and intentions are clearly specified and transparent.

Distrust can be minimised if everybody knows what is going on and that something actually happens, to improve the institution, as a result of the survey. In summary, to gain support and trust:

- the process must be transparent;
- senior management must be committed to the approach;
- action should result — resources must be made available;
- the agenda for change must be forward-looking (not recriminatory).

A UK view of student feedback

Systematic, institution-wide student feedback about the quality of their total educational experience is an area of growing activity in UK higher education institutions. It is also a growing concern in other countries around the world. The institution-wide approaches to student feedback fall into two broad categories:

- large-scale student satisfaction survey, which addresses a range of issues encompassing most of the services provided by the university;
- standardised, cross-institution course-based evaluation of teaching (and learning).

Satisfaction surveys

Satisfaction surveys fall into two broad types:

- those that provide management information designed to encourage action for improvement;
- those that provide a descriptive overview of student opinion (that can be reported on as part of appropriate accountability procedures).

Action-oriented surveys

There are many examples of satisfaction surveys designed to encourage local-level improvement. Many are based on the UCE model, described above, including: Cardiff Institute of Higher Education, Buckingham College of Higher Education, University of Central Lancashire, Auckland Institute of Technology (AIT), New Zealand, Lund University in Sweden and Jagiellonian University in Poland. All of these institutions have a similar approach, collecting student views to input into management decision making. There is variance in terms of sample size, publication of outcomes, action and feedback procedures.

Descriptive overviews

A number of universities undertake institution-wide surveys, often on a census basis, exploring a limited number of areas of student opinion. These are often only reported internally and are not as explicitly tied to a process of feedback and action. The surveys undertaken at Liverpool John Moore's, Leeds Metropolitan and Plymouth appear to be of this type.

Standardised course-based evaluations

An alternative approach to a satisfaction survey is to use standardised course-based surveys of student satisfaction with teaching. Many institutions adopt fairly unified approaches to collecting feedback from students on 'happy forms'. While this provides some inter-course comparison, it is on a limited range of areas and often the standardised form is a bland compromise that serves nobody's purposes.

Standardised course or module feedback usually involves questionnaires and inhibits much more useful qualitative discussion at the unit level. Qualitative discussion between staff or facilitators and students about the content and approach in particular course units or modules provides a more rapid and more in-depth appreciation of positive and negative aspects of taught courses or modules. However, this type of feedback could be seen as more time-consuming and therefore be a less popular choice than handing out questionnaires.

Often, standardised evaluations are, in fact, assessments of teacher performance as part of a peer and self-assessment approach to teaching quality. In some cases, they are used as part of the individual review of staff and can be taken into account in promotion and tenure situations (as at Wellington and Otago Universities in New Zealand and in many institutions in the United States).

The standardised evaluation approach has reached its nadir in Australia, where there is a country-wide evaluation questionnaire based on Paul Ramsden's well-known work. This provides some useful, although limited, information about the teaching and learning across Australia.

A more sophisticated approach to standardised course-based evaluation is outlined in the SECAT system (Student Evaluation of Courses and Teaching) used initially at Auckland University, New Zealand and now being developed at Auckland Institute of Technology . This system aims to:

• identify student perceptions of the quality of teaching;
• improve teaching through staff development linked to the issues identified by students.

There is an institution-wide system which each course is required to use. The questionnaire comprises 30 questions which can be chosen by the tutor from a university list of 100. The report of findings goes to the tutor's line manager, as the basis for staff development discussions.

Another approach that is based primarily on course evaluation is the satisfaction survey used at the Open University (OU). Although it does cover some wider, university, issues, it is primarily focused at the course level. In many respects, OU students are more firmly focused on their course than students in conventional universities. The OU aims to be able to give information on student views at the course level and that action is taken by courses. Courses are then re-surveyed to see if student satisfaction increases in responses to any changes made.

In theory, an institution could have a satisfaction survey and a course evaluation structure such as SECAT. However, there may be problems with student questionnaire fatigue.

Evaluation of institution-wide surveys

Derivation of questions
All the surveys use some form of questionnaire. There are differences in the ways in which the questionnaire content is determined. If the aim is to involve students as key stakeholders in their education, then a system which involves students in identifying the issues used in the questionnaire might be an appropriate approach.

This could reflect the form of the UCE or AIT survey, where the Group Feedback Strategy (GFS) uses focus groups of students to obtain the issues for the annual questionnaire survey.

Another example of student involvement in the questionnaire content is through focus groups or discussions with students unions, for example Wolverhampton University or Lund University, Sweden. The latter, in particular, encourages student union involvement in most stages of the process. This type of involvement may be more difficult in the UK where there is less of a culture of collaboration between student unions and institution management.

Reporting, action and feedback
The main differences between the satisfaction surveys are based on reporting, action and feedback.

As outlined above, UCE has a very structured process which is now integral to the University's decision-making processes. At a number of other institutions which have used UCE's models, there is a similar process of reporting and distribution, but they have yet to become established processes in terms of resultant action.

A number of institutions use various committees that are already in place to disseminate survey findings and discuss action, and most include reporting to senior managers.

- Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU) use academic committees at different levels to interpret the results and indicate future action.
- The University of Central Lancashire (UCL) asks managers to prepare action schedules.
- At Liverpool John Moore's (JMU) breakdowns are provided at school and programme levels. They are changing to self-evaluation and action planning into which results should feed.
- Middlesex University utilises the Faculty Academic Standards and Quality Committee which is a consultative action group.
- At Orebro, Sweden, each department is expected to incorporate the results of the survey in their 'quality plans'.

A number of these institutions report that it is difficult to pinpoint specific action resulting from the survey findings.

Feedback to students is recognised as an important element but is not always carried out effectively, or produces the awareness intended. Some institutions utilise current lines of communication between tutors and students and through the student unions and student representatives. All of these forms depend upon the effectiveness of these lines of communication. For example, JMU recognises the difficulty of using student course representatives, as do Middlesex. Other forms of feedback used include: articles in university magazines, posters and producing summaries aimed at students.

A final comment on collecting student views

Students are important stakeholders in the quality monitoring and assessment processes and it is important to obtain their views. However, there is more to quality monitoring than collecting data.

- If you are collecting student views then only collect what you can make use of.
- It is counterproductive to ask students for information then not use it; students become cynical and unco-operative if they think no one really cares about what they think.
- It is important to heed, examine and make use of student views.
- If data from surveys of students is going to be useful then it needs to be transformed into meaningful information.
- The information needs to be clearly reported, fed into systems of accountability and linked to a process of continuous quality improvement. The whole process must be accountable and part of a culture of improvement.

At UCE this process is heavily driven by a 'top-down' management style responding to student-generated concerns. A different model of action may be appropriate in other organisations.

The key to success in involving students in quality assurance is to ensure that action takes place on the basis of student views and that *action is seen to take place*.

This requires clear lines of communication, so that the impact of student views are fed back to students. In short, there needs to be a line of accountability back to the students to close the circle. It is not sufficient that students find out indirectly, if at all, that they have had a role in institutional policy.

Conclusion

Internal and external quality monitoring are not static processes. They develop in response to, among other things, political and economic climates. This has been seen in the UK over the last decade in response to changes such as the removal of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics, the political climate of public services having to be more accountable to the government and the public, and the rapid expansion of higher education. Over the next few years we will see developments in response to a new government, the recommendations from the Dearing Committee review and subsequent policy changes, and the restructuring of the Quality Assurance Agency. However, we can conclude that if quality monitoring is to be used to enhance the experience of students in higher education then systems will need to be responsive to key stakeholders (including students and staff). Quality monitoring needs to result in action and be more than just a fact-finding or paper pushing exercise. Also, continual enhancement needs to become more central to the debate and not just a by-product of accountability.

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