

Quality Assessment in English Universities

Keith J. MORGAN

< Abstract >

The procedures used for assessment of quality in teaching and institutional management in English universities are described. Over the past 15 years a rapid learning process has occurred, shared by the universities and the assessment agency. The agency has identified a non-intuitive framework necessary for adequate quality assurance; the universities have accepted this framework and recognised the institutional advantages it provides. The results confirm a generally high level for the quality of teaching and academic standards and rapidly improving standards of institutional management.

This is now to lead in 2003 to replacement of the previous agency-centred external review process by an internal university-based structure. The new procedure identifies university responsibility for academic standards and effective institutional management. External scrutiny will in future focus on the adequacy of procedures and practice within universities to sustain delivery of high standards.

An analysis of the impact of quality assessment on the universities suggests that the original initiative by the universities to introduce quality assurance and their subsequent positive response to its development have been influential in reasserting the role of universities in determining academic standards.

1. Introduction

Quality assessment is a well-established feature of higher education. Academic discussions regularly turn to appraisal of the relative

excellences of institutions, departments and colleagues. Yet even the subjective views expressed in such discussions increasingly refer to quantified performance indicators. More importantly, external interest in its quality has increased as the significance, the scale and the expense of higher education has grown. Considerations of public accountability for the financial support it requires and the significance attached to its work are persuasive arguments to justify demands for explicit and detailed assessment of its quality.

In the UK, quality assessment has been institutionalised in the Quality Assurance Agency¹. This was established in 1997 as a successor to the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) and the arrangements for academic audits introduced in the late 1980's by the universities themselves to monitor quality across the system. QAA, funded jointly by the universities and by government through the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC), has a wider mission².

“..to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced.”

The procedures adopted to fulfil this mission were programmes of detailed external reviews of academic departments (subject areas) and institutional practices. British universities have lengthy experience of external assessment by external examiners at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and by the arrangements for accreditation of degree programmes by the professional institutions (e.g. engineering, medicine, law, education...) where graduation satisfies the initial professional requirements. Even so, the procedures adopted for detailed scrutiny by QAA provided new challenges to the universities. The results have been generally accepted as valuable in identifying appropriate criteria and demonstrating achievement of high quality across the system. Although this satisfied the requirements of QAA's mission, the universities were deeply concerned about the burdens it imposed. In particular, it became evident that any proposal to repeat and extend

the reviews in their existing forms would be regarded as incapable of achieving any benefit commensurate with the cost. Given the general evidence of existing good quality performance across the system, it was not difficult for a decision to be accepted that the review process should be reformulated to reduce its burdens. A modified scheme, without detailed subject reviews, and emphasising each university's responsibilities for achieving high quality work is to be introduced in 2003.

Previously, QAA had identified two components in its total programme of Academic Reviews: Subject reviews and Institutional reviews³. In Sections 2 and 3 there are outline descriptions of the CVCP - HEQC - QAA schemes that operated in these two areas over the period 1989 – 2001: these reviews have now ended. Section 4 describes the features of the modified scheme and arrangements to be introduced in 2003; and Section 5 provides some commentary on the impact of quality assessment on the British university system.

2. Subject Reviews, 1993 –2001

A complete cycle of reviews across all the British universities, covering all 42 subject areas was completed over the eight-year period ending in 2001. Initially, as Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) this was the responsibility of HEQC (1993-6); subsequently QAA assumed contractual responsibility. Over this period there were evolutionary changes to the procedures, mainly in the emphasis placed on some of the components. Generally though the essential structure remained unchanged. It consisted of four main elements⁴.

2.1 It was a peer-review exercise. Small teams of specialists in the subject area visited each university to conduct the reviews. Usually in each team there were 3 or 4 specialists together with a chairman. The reviewers were usually academics from other universities but specialists from industry, commerce and the professions were recruited for appropriate areas.

2.2 The review sought to assess performance within a subject area for all taught courses, both postgraduate and undergraduate. Under the QAA, the assessment became codified under 6 headings. Each of them contained a number of components, identified in the form of questions to be answered.

(i) Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation

How appropriate are the design, organisation and content of the curriculum in relation to the intended learning outcomes and experiences? Are the learning opportunities appropriate to the intended outcomes? What evidence is there that the curriculum reflects good research, scholarship and practice, and, where relevant, current professional experience?

(ii) Teaching, Learning and Assessment.

Does the pattern adopted for teaching, learning and assessment correspond to the stated aims and objectives of the department and the university? Is the programme appropriate in terms of the knowledge, understanding, analytical and subject-specific skills that are expected? What evidence exists to show that the teaching achieves its objectives? How effective are the assessment processes in promoting learning and identifying achievement?

(iii) Student Progression and Achievement

Do the numbers of applicants and the qualifications for admission match the aims of the department? Are the achieved rates of progression and completion satisfactory? What evidence is there that the qualifications awarded indicate an appropriate level of student achievement?

(iv) Student Support and Guidance

Is there an overall strategy to support and guide students? Are the arrangements in this strategy understood by staff and students? Are the arrangements for tutorials well matched to the needs of the

students, the curriculum and the assessment processes? Are arrangements for student welfare and for career guidance clear and well understood?

(v) Learning Resources

What arrangements exist for access to appropriate resources for learning? Are library resources available and accessible to meet the requirements of the curriculum? Is IT and other equipment available at levels and of sufficient quality to match the needs of teaching and learning? Is accommodation for teaching, learning and social activity available and appropriate to the needs?

(vi) Quality Management and Enhancement

How effective are the internal arrangements for monitoring and evaluating achievement of the aims and objectives of the subject area? How have these arrangements made improvements possible? How effective are the processes of self-evaluation and continuing improvement of standards?

2.3 The department would have prepared a document offering its own self-assessment. This would include a statement of its aims and objectives and evidence to demonstrate the quality of its educational provision over the six aspects identified in section (see 2.2). The aims were expected to express the department's broad educational purposes in providing its programmes of study, essentially answering the question "Why do we seek to provide education?" The objectives would identify the results and experiences that constituted successful completion of the courses: in effect, the objectives would aim to answer the questions "What are the intended outcomes, how are these achieved, and how do we know that they are achieved?"

Limitations were imposed on the length of the description of the aims (250 words) and objectives (500-1000 words). The self-assessment document was required to contain much additional factual material, relating to student and staff numbers for the university and the depart-

ment, entrance standards, applications, degree results, graduate careers. Including the answers to the questions posed in relation to the quality of the six aspects of educational provision identified in section 2.2 its total length was expected to be no more than about 20 pages.

2.4 The quality of educational provision in the subject area was assessed in the context of the criteria defined by the department's stated aims and objectives. The quality review did not seek to invoke a preferred or recommended set of aims and objectives; acceptance and recognition of diversity was implicit in the review. The ability of the programmes and the provisions identified by the department to match the criteria it had defined for itself provided the basis for the review team's judgement.

The review process extended over a lengthy period. Timing of a review into a specified subject would be agreed with a university at least 12 months in advance. This triggered preparations by the university and the QAA in order to provide an appropriate programme for the review team. The review culminated in a visit to the department lasting about 4 days. Some six months before the visit, the department was expected to submit documentation of its self-assessment (see 2.3). Within the department, extensive additional documentation would be assembled. This would include material related to general university practice and much specific departmental information. The information would include, course handbooks and descriptions, lecture notes, student work and project reports, student feedback, reports from external examiners, internal reviews, professional and statutory bodies, and from employers. Statistical data relating to applications, enrolment and progression of students, examination results, graduations and employment would be collated. Detailed information about academic staff, training and development programmes and their wider research and service activities would be included. All this together with accounts of the university's operating principles and practices would either be incorporated in the documents submitted to QAA for the review team or held for their use during the visit. It became customary

for at least one senior member of the department together with experienced staff in the central university administration to devote most of one year to co-ordinating these preparations.

The visit of the review team provided an opportunity for them to test assertions in the department's self-assessment and to clarify any areas of obscurity in the documentary submissions. The programme for the visit would always include time for discussions with staff and students and allow the subject specialists to observe the range of teaching provided.

At the end of the visit the review team would present its findings. In the initial years, under HEQC, the results of the TQA were expressed either as "Excellent", "Satisfactory" or "Unsatisfactory". Under QAA, the subject review produced a more detailed "Graded Profile". For this, each of the six aspects of provision (listed in 2.2) was assigned a numerical grade 1-4 : level 1 was unacceptable; level 2 corresponded to attainment of at least an acceptable standard. However, accumulation of three or more aspects graded at 2 would require the university and the department to prepare a plan for immediate improvement; any assessment at grade 1 would cause QAA to undertake a further full review within 12 months.

The final meeting with members of the department and the university enabled the chairman to indicate the strengths and weaknesses identified by the review team. This "summative judgement" included comment on the achievements in each of the six aspects of provision as well as other matters of substance. Subsequently these comments were developed into written report that included details of the graded profile. This was presented to the university and published by QAA. These reports – for all colleges and universities and for all 42 subject areas – are available on the QAA web site.

3. Institutional Reviews 1989-2001

The universities themselves first established provision of a system-wide scheme of external quality review of British universities. In 1989

the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP, now Universities UK (UUK)) established its Academic Audit unit to examine and report on the procedures used by individual universities to ensure the quality and standards of their academic programmes. Following incorporation of the polytechnics as universities, this work was taken over by HEQC (1992) and subsequently transferred to QAA in 1997. Its original designation was academic audit, extended to academic quality audit (HEQC) and to continuation audit (QAA) and institutional review (QAA); it is to re-emerge in 2003 as institutional audit. Persistence of the term “audit” does not imply either a passive process or the arithmetical methods of financial audits. It does though combine features of both classical and financial implications by indicating reliance on material presented by a university and on seeking documentary evidence to substantiate claims.

The original CVCP academic audit sought to establish whether institutional procedures constituted a satisfactory guarantee of educational standards and quality of awards. In the context of institutional aims and objectives it identified four specific areas for enquiry.

- arrangements for approval and review of awards and degree schemes
- availability of effective teaching facilities
- quality of academic staff
- procedures to establish that academic programmes operated satisfactorily

HEQC added two further areas for enquiry:

- assessment processes
- procedures for establishing and monitoring standards of awards

In principle, QAA followed the path identified by CVCP and HEQC but broadened the scope of the review process by directing it to cover the effectiveness of all the relevant institutional arrangements⁵.

Explicitly it posed questions: “How do you know that you are able to guarantee standards and quality?” and “Can you convince us that your arrangements are sufficient, valid and reliable?” In directing those who performed the reviews they listed four key questions that needed answers from the institution in each of the areas of review:

- Why are you doing it this way?
- Why is this the best way to do it?
- How do you know it works?
- How can it be improved?

By using these questions, QAA was able to create a structure for its Continuation Reviews and Institutional Reviews similar to that for the Subject Reviews. Its structure consisted of 4 main components.

3.1 It was a peer-review exercise with a review team similar in size and composition to that used for subject review. Expertise in institutional matters replaced expertise in subject areas.

3.2 Review teams concentrated on four main areas of scrutiny.

- (i) *Institutional strategy for management of the educational provision.*
- (ii) *Academic standards of the awards.*
- (iii) *Learning infrastructure.*
- (iv) *Internal and external communications.*

In essence, the evidence submitted to the review by the university in each of these areas would be subjected to the tests of the 4 key questions.

3.3 Universities prepared a substantial document for the review, identified as an “Analytical Account”. It was expected that this would indicate and evaluate the way in which the university exercised its

responsibility for ensuring the standard of each award granted in its name was maintained; and how it ensured that the quality of education it provided enabled students to attain these standards. An Analytical Account, usually some 30-40 pages long, would describe briefly the key features of the university's processes relating to the four main areas of scrutiny (see 3.2), provide a self-assessment of the strengths and limitations of these processes, and describe arrangements being made to enhance its existing arrangements. It would be expected that a university would comment on any developments subsequent to previous audits, particularly if these had identified areas of concern.

An essential component of the Analytical Account would be an analysis of the effectiveness of its policies and procedures, identifying documentary evidence to support its conclusions. Where this evidence was not included in the Analytical Account, it would be necessary for the university to make it available to the review team.

3.4 The fitness of a university's provision for institutional quality assurance was judged in relation to its stated aims and objectives. As with subject reviews, no attempt was made to impose absolute standards: institutions were expected to be diverse. However, familiarity with standards for awards across the whole system of universities implied that review teams would comment if a university failed to ensure an appropriate level and maintain adequate scrutiny across the full range of its provision.

The actual process of an institutional review followed a similar sequence to that for a subject review. The team would expect to receive the "Analytical Account" about 3 months before its visit to the university. This would allow its members opportunity to inform the university of additional material they would expect to find available at the time of the visit. The university would collect material similar to that required by a subject review but covering all academic courses in the university together with statistical data for student applications, enrolments, progression, and graduation. The visit would last normally one week, with members of the team separately or jointly meeting with

academic, administrative and other staff and with students.

The final part of the visit would be devoted to drafting a report. The review team would have started with an assumption that explicit arrangements for monitoring its academic standards and quality would exist. The purpose of the review was to confirm that these arrangements were appropriate, reliable and robust. Usually a report would be structured to reflect the evidence in regard to each of the four main themes of enquiry. The review team would expect that the evidence allowed them to comprehend the university's current practices in each of them and to identify those matters justifying commendation and those requiring further consideration. The latter would be characterised as those where it might be *desirable* to modify current practice, those where some action might be *advisable*, and those where it was *necessary* that urgent reform be implemented. Where it could be concluded that no matters required urgent remedy and few changes seemed advisable, the review judgement would be that the institutional arrangements carried *overall confidence*. Evidence of a small number of matters requiring immediate remedy or a larger number that it would be advisable to modify would carry an overall judgement of *limited confidence*. Where more serious concerns were evident, the judgement would be one of *no confidence*: this was not a common occurrence.

A final report following each visit to a university was published by QAA: these reports are available both in printed form and on the QAA web site. Summarising the overall judgements, QAA wrote⁶:

“(A)fter visits to almost all the higher education institutions in the UK, (it) might be (stated) that all now have a battery of procedures intended to ensure quality; that many have some procedures that do assure particular aspects of quality; but that only a small number have well developed and reliable means of fully assuring their quality.....There is an increasing recognition within higher education that academic standards need to be both better understood and articulated, in theory and prac-

...But it will cost time and money to achieve (this), and will profoundly alter the way in which higher education functions and is structured.”

4. Institutional Audits 2003-

It had become apparent on completion of the cycle of subject reviews in 2001 that changes in the arrangements for quality assessment had become essential. In its operating plans, QAA had scheduled extensive modification of its procedures at this stage; the universities indicated that the burdens imposed, particularly by subject reviews, were seen to be quite disproportionate to any benefits. Following joint discussions with UUK, QAA and other bodies, the principal government agency, HEFCE, undertook a major consultative exercise in 2001⁷. Over the comparatively short period of 4 months, general agreement was reached about a new system of Institutional Audits that would operate with “a lighter touch”⁸. The new arrangements were formally announced in March 2002 for implementation in 2003⁹.

While Institutional Audits are to retain much of the format and structure of subject and institutional reviews, their intent and emphases are substantially changed¹⁰. Primarily this is indicated by the emphasis now given to the universities rather than the regulatory agency for what they do educationally, academically and through exercise of their formal powers of awarding degrees. Recognition of the universities as the responsible entities is not new – it appeared regularly in QAA documents – but it is now given far greater prominence.

Three significant contributions to this change in emphasis can be identified. First, QAA, despite the caution of its comments written earlier in 2001 and quoted at the end of Section 3, was able to say later in 2001¹¹:

“....these proposals will capitalise on the considerable progress made by higher education institutions over the past

decade in securing their academic quality and standards.”.....”the audits and assessments over the past decade have confirmed that there are no major systemic problems with quality and standards across higher education in the UK. There is no need to subject the academic community to repeated detailed external review at the micro level.”

Second is completion of a set of QAA basic documents, providing fixed points of reference for quality assessment across the whole system. There are three key documents: the Code of Practice for Assurance of Academic Quality¹², the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications¹³ and Subject Benchmark Statements¹⁴. The Code of Practice contains 10 sections covering a wide range of institutional management from recruitment and admission of students, programme review, and assessment to careers education, to student appeals. The Code identifies system-wide expectations for the precepts that should be embodied in management in all universities. The Framework is designed to ensure a consistent basis for the standards used in designating university degrees and other awards. Subject Benchmarks have been prepared for a total of 42 subject areas, effectively covering almost all academic subject areas. They are compiled by subject specialists and present general expectations about the standards for the award of degrees and the attributes that graduates should be able to demonstrate. These three documents are deliberately non-prescriptive in that they do not seek to impose prescriptions but they do provide a structure within which the academic standards and quality of universities and their courses of study can be assessed.

Third is acceptance by the HEFCE and the universities of agreed lists of information that will be provided by all institutions¹⁵. The lists are extensive, covering quantitative and qualitative material that is expected to be available in all universities, and part of which should be available publicly (Appendix 1). Much of the quantitative data is already collected by universities both for their own purposes and for submission to HEFCE and publication by HESA; similarly much of the

qualitative information already constitutes part of a university's regular management data base. There may though have been considerable variation between universities in the way information has been presented. It appears that a standardised presentation will be encouraged for the publicly available information and a more uniform pattern for all data may well develop across the whole system. This set of information will be the focus of scrutiny during the institutional audit, and in the context of the three key QAA documents, will constitute the basis for establishing the level of confidence that the university can be accorded.

The structure of the institutional audit follows the pattern established for quality assessment reviews¹⁶.

4.1 It remains a peer-review exercise. The audit teams are expected to consist of 3-7 members. They will be drawn from an extensive list of experienced university and professional staff, commonly having been nominated to QAA by their own institutions. They will have attended special induction and training programmes arranged on behalf of QAA.

4.2 The audit will concentrate on three main areas.

- (i) *Conformity of procedures and practices to the three basic documents* (Code of Practice, Framework for Academic Awards, Subject Benchmarks)
- (ii) *Accuracy, completeness and reliability of the publicly available information*
- (iii) *Examples of internal quality assessment at programme level*¹⁷

4.3 The main submission from the university is now to be known as the Self-Evaluation Document (SED). This will be a substantial document, perhaps some 30-40 pages long. It is intended to provide a university with opportunity to describe and evaluate the ways in which it provides programmes and awards of appropriate standards

and quality, and show how it ensures that its published information is accurate and reliable. The university will seek to present evidence in its SED to justify confidence in all aspects of this work. To achieve this it will need to indicate how it knows that its internal review processes are effective; and when advice has been given previously following institutional and subject reviews, show that it has responded adequately.

Where the audit team has indicated that it will pursue discipline audit trails, additional, shorter SED's (3000 words) will be needed from each of the identified subject areas. These will take the form of much shortened versions of the self-assessments prepared previously for subject reviews.

It is also expected that the students of the university will make a written submission. This might comment on the same topics as the university's SED but with particular emphasis on information available to students, about the academic performance expected of them, and of their experience of the instruction, examination and assessment processes. It is noted that the student submission should be relevant, concise, adopt an institution-wide perspective and be balanced between description and analysis.

4.4 The audit will focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of a university's arrangements for internal scrutiny of quality and standards in the context of its published information and the relationship to the three key documents – the Code, the Framework, and the Subject Benchmarks.

The "lighter" schedule for an institutional audit remains extensive. Initial planning will have started 10-12 months before the visit of the audit team. A preliminary planning meeting with the university will have been arranged by QAA about 9 months before the visit and this will be followed by decisions on the number of discipline audit trails and thematic enquiries to be included. The university, the students and those departments involved in audit trails will submit their SED's about 5 months before the visit and this will be followed by a

briefing meeting to identify any subsequent clarification needed. The visit itself will last one week and will be devoted principally to discussions of the documentary submissions. At the end of the visit the audit team will determine its decisions.

The decisions take the form of judgements on the levels of confidence that can be accorded to the university on its practices and procedures and on the reliability that can be placed in its published information. The judgements will usually be accompanied by recommendations for consideration or implementation by the university. Three levels of confidence are identified. *Broad confidence* indicates that the audit confirms the existence and effective use of rigorous mechanisms for management of quality and standards; these will include full use of independent external examiners in assessment and of independent external members in internal reviews. A judgement of *limited confidence* implies either detectable weakness in the management or the implementation of existing procedures or in the reliability of the published information. It may well be that the weakness lies in the failure of the university to be aware of a weakness or alternatively in its failure to rectify it. A decision of limited confidence will be followed by a formal request that the university indicates within 3 months the remedial action it will take. A decision of *no confidence* indicates serious and fundamental failure at institutional and/or departmental level to provide proper control of standards and quality; or that the published information is unreliable and may be misleading. Such a judgement requires immediate remedial action by the university. Where there has been a judgement of “no confidence”, an immediate plan would be required and be followed by institutional action, regular progress reports and a return visit by QAA after 18 months. If doubts about confidence remain, QAA might decide to undertake a further institutional audit.

The audit team will also identify aspects of the university’s arrangements which merit commendation as examples of good practice; and make recommendations where some improvements may be indicated. Recommendations will be identified by priority as *desirable*, *advisable*

or essential.

The audit is completed by publishing a report. In the report, as well as presenting the evidence for their judgements and recommendations, the audit team will be able to comment on any other matters relating to the university's internal quality assurance regime or the quality and standards of its awards. They will also report on the findings of the disciplinary audit trails pursued. It is expected that the report will be published no later than 5-6 months after the visit has been concluded.

5. The impact of quality assessment

Replacement of the existing schemes of quality assessment with the new institutional audits constitutes a major change in policy. The change is far greater than that anticipated by QAA, which had been planning merely to modify its existing arrangements. The driving force for change came from the universities. Their experience of subject reviews led to the view that they had become grossly extravagant, with the benefits for institutions being perceived to be insubstantial in terms of the time and money expended. Indeed, in the year 2000-2001, QAA conducted 384 subject reviews: of the 2,300 grades, 96% were at level 4 (65%) or level 3 (31%) and all subject areas reviewed in universities and colleges of higher education were rated "quality approved"¹⁸.

Yet the change in universities has been equally remarkable. The importance departments and institutions now assign to teaching and the quality of its delivery has increased hugely. Over the 12-year period of audits and reviews, their value has been recognised to the extent that their methods are now incorporated within universities own procedures. This was not so in 1989 when the older universities started their scheme of academic audit. That initiative was largely intended to demonstrate that universities did exercise responsibility in assessing the quality of their work. Implicit in that scheme was confidence that academic standards were assured by the long-standing

system of external examiners. While satisfaction can properly be taken from the wisdom of the universities in providing the first audits in 1989, and that the new institutional audits in 2003 will attach similar importance to external examiners and assessors, the system itself has undergone fundamental change. For convenience, the components of change can be grouped under three headings.

5.1 Massification

The period of quality assessment in the universities has coincided with a period of growth. The two aspects are not unrelated. Growth in many organisations is commonly accompanied by concern about maintenance of quality; when growth is linked to increased diversity, the concern is magnified. The university system has expanded dramatically since 1989. There have been two phases: incorporation of the polytechnics as full universities, effectively doubling the number of institutions and students; and rapid growth across the whole system, completing its transformation into a massified system with the age participation rate increased from less than 20% to over 30%. Broadening of the base for enrolment and of the range of degree courses corresponded to social and political aspirations but simultaneously fed concerns about academic standards and quality. For the new universities there were concerns about low entrance requirements, weak programmes in professional courses, and new degree schemes in non-traditional subjects; for the old universities there were equal concerns about failure to respond to the needs of non-traditional students, of rigid procedures and of out-dated programmes. Moreover it was evident that differences in degree schemes reflected a great diversity in aims and objectives across the whole university system. As expressed by government, there were doubts - about the ability of the universities to meet the needs of students and of employers - and questions - about the value they provided for the public money invested in them.

5.2 Role of the Regulator

Concerns about the universities in the early 1990's were

summarised in the questions “What is it that the universities do, and how do we know that they do it well?” Answers provided by the universities own initiative of “academic audits” were insufficient to convince a sceptical government: self-regulation was regarded as protecting self-interest. Creation of HEQC and subsequently QAA accompanied new legislation that imposed statutory requirements on the universities to meet standards both for their financial management and for their academic work.

The initial task of HEQC and QAA was to establish methods for assessing the quality of work in universities. Their success in achieving this constitutes an important achievement. A major difficulty, diversity of procedures, aims and objectives across the now wide range of university institutions, would have undoubtedly defeated any self-regulatory system attempted by the universities themselves. Initial reluctance to submit to the intrusion of subject reviews was modified, first by the reassuring approval accorded by the reports (in most cases), and then by recognition that the reviews provided institutionally useful information. An intra-institutional learning process allowed all university departments to share in the benefits. Consequently procedures that were found to be satisfactory by QAA reviewers were rapidly adopted, so limiting the additional benefits from actual reviews. It is arguable that this rapid learning experience could have allowed an earlier change in the QAA review process. However, seeking a change before the cycle of reviews was completed might well have appeared premature to the external clients. In the event, by allowing the evidence to accumulate, even government was satisfied that its statutory requirements permitted it to accept the universities’ rejection of a continuing programme of subject reviews.

In effect by 2001 QAA had provided an answer to the question “Do we know that they do it well?” It was also able to offer some answers to the accompanying question “What is it that they do?” These answers are in the form of the 3 key documents, the “Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards”, “The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications” and the “Subject

Benchmark Statements”. Together the three documents define the boundaries within which universities’ aims and objectives are to be found. The documents do not attempt to prescribe arrangements or content for university work; rather they present a spectrum of attributes, which, by common consent, will cover the programmes, and practices of universities. Even so, by themselves, the documents might be construed as a further erosion of the academic autonomy of the universities. That this would be a misapprehension is clearly indicated by the emphasis now given by QAA to recognition of the responsibility of each university for its academic standards. Acceptance of these documents by its clients defines the new role for QAA in its work of quality assurance.

The principal group of clients must be the universities themselves. Here the job of QAA as regulator becomes essentially to “keep the universities honest”. This will entail ensuring that each university’s practices are coherent and consistent with the 3 key documents and that its public statements are accurate and reliable. In both of these, QAA is acting as proxy for the public, who even with user-friendly university web sites are unlikely to seek detailed analyses. Two conventionally important public groups of clients are prospective students and prospective employers. There is little evidence that either of these groups use university performance or quality data rather than accessibility, achievement and status as bases for enrolment or employment. Conversely, students attending a university may well benefit from freer access to the data both for academic and career purposes.

More important are the requirements of government as a client. It was at the insistence of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) that the requirements for quantitative information (Appendix 1) were included in the performance criteria. The statistical data, already published by HESA, cover student ages, gender, ethnicity, disabilities, socio-economic background, admission, progression, qualifications and employment. The universities are seen by DfES as principal agents in their programmes of social engineering. The data provide perfor-

mance indicators indicating the levels of provision and support for minority ethnic groups, students with disadvantage, disability, or socio-economic deprivation. With government priorities identified in all these areas and a stated objective of widening access to an age-participation rate of 50%, this may provide a new dimension for quality performance in the universities.

5.3 Impact on the Universities

The pragmatic and sensible decision of the CVCP to start an academic audit in 1989 has been rewarded now in the arrangements for the new institutional audits across the system. The universities' original initiative enabled them to exercise a powerful influence in formulating the agenda for HEQC and QAA. Although the benefits of this appeared less evident in the latter years of the subject reviews, recognition of the relative responsibilities of the universities and the regulator are now reaffirmed.

Transfer of detailed scrutiny to the institutions is in accord with changes in their managerial practices. A combination of increased size and complexity in conjunction with regulations and the requirements of accountability have enforced change. The extent of this is indicated by the array of basic management data that is accepted as necessary for quality control in a modern university. The catalogue of internal documentation (Appendix 1) does not constitute a new burden but rather reflects the accretion of existing practice.

While rejecting the burdens and the mechanics of the QAA subject reviews, universities and departments have acknowledged the benefits. Criticism that high scores achieved in the subject reviews merely reflected successful review techniques and submissions is not valid. Even superficial observation reveals fundamental changes in attitudes to teaching and departmental performance across the university system. The matrix, of aspects of teaching and learning provision and the key questions used in the QAA subject reviews constitutes a robust structure, previously lacking in institutional internal reviews. Undoubtedly it will continue to be used as a checklist for assessors in internal

reviews.

The roles of external examiners and assessors are identified as crucial in maintaining these improvements through internal review. Emphasis is placed on the independence of external advice; but it also carries an implication of common standards and achievement across the system. The many professional bodies that accredit the courses in university departments have similarly shared interest in common standards and achievement. A continuing test of the diversified system will be how well its standards can satisfy the narrower demands of professional accreditation. A number of the professional bodies – notably those for lawyers and the health professions – were reluctant to see the end of subject reviews as they provided acceptable substitutes for their own appraisals. However, as the professional bodies have contributed to formulation of the Subject Benchmarks, it is likely that they will become reconciled to a return to the pre-1990's pattern of accreditation.

Application of common standards across the system in no way precludes diversity, as is already established. The increasing numbers of non-traditional students and courses will continue to encourage academic diversity. It is though not always appreciated that the concept of diversity must include retain some aspects of the older elite system. Many employers – and notably government through the civil service – actively seek graduates from traditional programmes. Inevitably, some universities are better able to prepare students for such employment. Over time, more employers will learn how best to utilize the special advantages available by recruiting graduates of non-traditional programmes. Equally, universities will increasingly discover ways to inculcate traditional strengths through non-traditional programmes. Even so, while quality-of-output rather than value-added-to-input is both a key performance indicator and a requirement of the market, universities will compete for students with high abilities and attainment. Conflict is already evident when this pursuit of ability is seen to be in opposition to official policies of socio-economic engineering. Conventionally- and crudely- a dividing line is seen in this regard

between the “old” and the “new” universities. Criticism of those old universities whose performance indicators for admission and enrolment fail to respond to official policies of social equity accompanies commendations for academic excellence.

The impact of quality assessment on the British universities forms only part of the changes effected by the series of reforms culminating in the 1991 Higher and Further Education Act. The Act empowers government to obtain assurance of the standards and quality of the work of the universities. This now forms part of the contract between each university and government through which HEFC provides its annual subsidy. Introduction of tuition fees paid by students identifies them as clients and leads to the central –and increasingly significant – role they play in quality assurance. Conversely the changed status of academic staff from “members of the university” to “employees” might be expected to reduce their collegial commitment. This may be counterbalanced by encouragement to enhance their professional skills and status as university teachers through formal qualification and registration.

Overall, the effects of the quality assurance exercises have provided a system that is demonstrably accountable and managerially effective. The quality of academic work in British universities is evidently high both in regard to teaching and, through the separate exercise, in research. It should be a cause of satisfaction that the huge expansion of the system has been accompanied by improvement in the assessed performance. Yet within the universities it is apparent that the system is deeply stressed. Inevitably failure to match increased productivity with funding through the 1990’s expansion shows a cumulative effect. Perhaps the biggest challenge to sustaining high standards will be a failure to accept that they entail high – or at least higher – costs.

Appendix 1

A. Information expected to be available in all universities

1. General statements

- Mission statement and corporate plan
- Statement of the University's quality assurance policies and processes
- Statement of the University's learning and teaching strategy and reviews of progress

2. Student admission, progression and completion

- Student entry qualifications
- Students at entry classified by age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability, geographical origin
- Student progression and retention by year of each course
Student completions and qualifications
- First destinations of graduates

3. Information on procedures for assuring academic quality and standards

a. Information on programme approval, monitoring and review.

- Programme specifications
- Roles and responsibilities of committees involved in internal programme approval and review
- Results of current approvals and annual monitoring and review processes
- Internal reports of major programme reviews and reviews by departments or faculties
- Accreditation reports from professional, statutory or regulatory bodies

b. Information of assessment procedures

- Assessment strategies, processes and procedures
- Range and nature of prescribed student work
- External examiners reports and actions taken
- Reports of reviews of assessment methods

c. Information covering student views on university services and facilities.

- Academic and tutorial guidance, support and supervision
- Equipment, space and facilities for teaching and learning
- Perceptions of teaching quality and the range of teaching methods
- Assessment arrangements
- Pastoral support

d. Information available for internal reviews of quality and standards.

- Effectiveness of teaching and learning in relation to programme aims and curriculum content
- Range of teaching methods used
- Availability of specialist equipment, resources and materials to support teaching and learning
- Professional development for staff including peer observation and mentoring programmes
- Use of external benchmarking and other comparators
- Involvement of external assessors in reviews and actions taken following their comments

B. Information for publication by all universities

1. Quantitative Data

- All data in A2 except classification of students by age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability, and geographical

origin

2. Qualitative Data

- Summaries of external examiners reports and a commentary at institutional level on their findings
- Feedback from recent graduates, obtained from national survey data
- Feedback from current students obtained by internal survey
- Summary statement of university's learning and teaching strategy
- Summary of the results from internal departmental reviews
- Summaries of the university's links with employers and the impact made by these links on teaching programmes

Notes of Appendix 1

1. Most of the general statements (A1) and much of the quantitative data (A2, B1) is already supplied to HEFCE or the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and is accessible through their publications.
2. An extended national First Destination Survey is proposed to supply the additional information at institutional and departmental levels that is envisaged in section B2.
3. A standard form is proposed for internal surveys for the feedback information from current students (B2).
4. Information (Section B) will be published through the Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO) web site, which provides links to each university's home page.

Appendix 2
Glossary of Abbreviations Used

CVCP	Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now UUK)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills http://www.dfes.gov.uk/index.htm
HEFC	Higher Education Funding Council
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England http://www.hefce.ac.uk/
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HERO	Higher Education and Research Opportunities http://www.hero.ac.uk/
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency http://www.hesa.co.uk/
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education http://www.qaa.ac.uk/
SED	Self-Evaluation Document
TQA	Teaching Quality Assessment
UUK	Universities UK (successor to CVCP)

Notes

- 1) QAA (2002) *Quality assurance in UK higher education-a brief guide.*
- 2) QAA (2002) *The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: An Introduction.*
- 3) QAA (1999) *Handbook for academic review.* Assessments of research quality have been conducted separately by HEFCE. An analysis of the results and the impact of the research assessment exercises on English universities are given in Morgan (2002).
- 4) QAA (1999) *QAA Subject review handbook (2000-2001).*
- 5) QAA (2001) *Notes for the guidance of audit teams.*
- 6) Ditto.
- 7) HEFCE(2001) *Quality assurance in higher education, Proposals for consul-*

- tation, HEFCE, QAA, UUK, Standing Conference of Principals.*
- 8) QAA (2001) *Report on responses to HEFCE Consultative document 01/45.*
 - 9) QAA (2002) *New review system for quality assurance in English higher education, press release.*
 - 10) QAA (2002) *QAA external review process for higher education in England: Operational description.*
 - 11) QAA (2001) *Higher Quality 9-Reaping the benefits.*
 - 12) QAA, *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education, sections 1-10, 1999-2001.*
 - 13) QAA (2001) *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.*
 - 14) QAA, *Subject Benchmark Statements, parts 1- 42, 2000- 2002.*
 - 15) HEFCE(2002) *Information on quality and standards in higher education.*
 - 16) QAA (2002) *Handbook for institutional audit: England – Draft for Consultation, 0205/2002.*
 - 17) These may be in the form of both discipline audit trails and thematic enquiries across the whole institution. It is indicated that discipline audit trails might be expected to cover about 10% of a university's teaching programmes.
 - 18) QAA (2002) *Annual Report and financial summary.*