Development and Future of Quality Assurance Activities of QAA
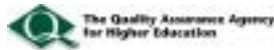
Carolyn Campbell
Assistant Director (International)
Chief Executive's Group

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Overview

- The UK higher education context
- External Quality Assurance in UK higher education: a short history, a long story
- The new landscape for the quality assurance of UK higher education
- Future developments and challenges

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The UK higher education system(s)

- Political devolution has resulted in three higher education systems (England & Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) with points of convergence in quality and academic standards
- 170 universities and colleges of higher education ('recognised' bodies – www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedbodies)
- More than 200 other colleges and organisations who offer programmes leading to the award of university degrees ('listed' bodies)
- More than 2 million HE students in the UK
  - 55% are female
  - 1/3 studying part-time
  - 12% are international
- Increasing numbers of students outside UK on UK programmes

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UK universities and higher education institutions (1)

- Derive their power to award degrees and use the title 'university' from the state
- Degree awarding powers are irrevocable and unlimited
- Higher education institutions are 'corporations'; Vice Chancellors and Principals are Chief Executive Officers
- Higher education institutions have
  - Intellectual autonomy
  - Functional/constitutional autonomy
  - Operational autonomy

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UK universities and higher education colleges (2)

- Although effectively 'private' organisations, UK HEIs are mainly funded – for teaching and research – through public funds
- The government uses funding to steer higher education
- The Funding Councils have statutory responsibility for the assessment of the quality of publicly funded higher education and with the research councils manage the quality assessment of research (RAE)
- The Quality Assurance Agency focuses on the quality assurance of teaching, learning and institutional quality management

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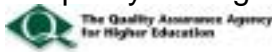
External QA in UK Higher Education

- largely a phenomenon of the last twelve years
- politically driven (Further and Higher Education Act 1992 – Section 70)
- accountability led
- enhancement possibilities
- twin-track audit/assessment
  - audit – institutional management of quality and standards
  - assessment – inspection based reviews of subjects
- highly controversial area

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History (1)

- 1960s-1992 CNAA: the institutional review and programme validation of the Polytechnics
- 1990-1992 Academic Audit Unit: institutional audits of pre-1992 universities only
- 1992-1997 Higher Education Quality Council: institutional audits of all higher education institutions in the UK
- 1997-2002 QAA 'continuation' audits
- 2003 - QAA
  - institutional audit (England & N.Ireland)
  - enhancement led institutional review (ELIR Scotland)
  - institutional review (Wales)

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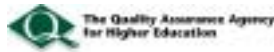
History (2)

- 1993-1997 HE Funding Councils: Teaching Quality Assessments(TQA)
- 1997-2001 QAA subject reviews
- 2904 subject review visits made, 62 overview subject reports involving 5700 reviewers and assessors in England alone
- Current QAA engagement at subject/programme level (all in England) includes
  - review of HE in Further Education Colleges
  - review of Foundation Degrees
  - major review of provision funded by the Department of Health

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Learning from subject review 1993-2001

- Much commentary in the Media and from institutions about the impact of subject review
- February 2004, QAA published synopsis of trends found in the reports
  - Highlighting lessons learnt
  - Opportunities for sharing good practice

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Subject review: did it meet its purposes?

- **Accountability for public funds**
  - Confirmation that majority of provision met expectations for quality and standards
- **To provide a link with funding to enhance quality**
  - Partially met
- **Providing accessible public information**
  - Achieved with publication of all reports from 1995
- **Sharing and publicising best practice**
  - Met through training of reviewers
  - Extent of participation in review
  - Publication of subject and overview reports

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(Universal) subject review – was it worth it?

- Forced the academic community to take a systematic and careful look at its teaching activities in a way that it had never done so before;
- Despite hostility, findings confirmed general high quality in all subjects and a high level of commitment from teachers at a time of rapid change and declining resources;
- Raised the profile of learning and teaching – an important factor in managing the widening of access to higher education

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Subject review was not a long term answer to external quality assurance in the UK because

- of cost and the overhead burden to institutions
- the adoption of 'grades' was too readily translated into league tables
- of the rapid decline in the usefulness of its information over time
- of diminishing returns as institutions learnt ways of ensuring good scores
- politically it was not worth the continuing row

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But

Subject reviews helped to develop a robust 'quality culture' within institutions and provide evidence that supported the shift from subject-based reviews to institutionally based quality evaluation systems in the UK, hence the 'repatriation' of responsibility for standards and quality to institutions.

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The quality assurance of UK higher education: principles

- Put responsibility for assuring quality and standards clearly within institutions
- Place certain specific obligations on institutions
- Require institutions to publish full, accurate and verifiable information about quality and standards for students and others

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## The new QA landscape for higher education in the UK consists of

- Implementation of the 'academic infrastructure'
- Published information about quality and standards in individual institutions
- Student surveys
- New QAA quality assurance processes
  - Institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland
  - Enhancement led institutional review in Scotland
  - Institutional review in Wales

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QAA's mission……

"to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education" Strategic Plan 2003-2005

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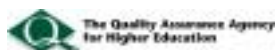
Defining 'standards' and 'quality'

- **Academic standards** are predetermined and explicit levels of achievement which must be reached for a declaration to be made of the successful completion of a programme of study by a student and the granting of any associated award or qualification

- **Academic quality** is a way of describing the effectiveness of all those things that are done or provided to ensure that students have the best possible opportunity to meet the stated outcomes of their programmes and the academic standards of the awards they are seeking

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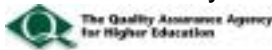
What is the academic infrastructure?

- In 1996, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education recommended an explicit framework within which UK higher education would deal with quality and standards. Has resulted in:
- Two frameworks of higher education qualifications (England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Scotland – a credit and qualifications framework);
- Subject benchmark statements – currently 65+;
- *Code* of Practice for Quality Assurance: 10 sections;
- Programme specifications (produced by institutions).

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What does QAA do?

- Develops and maintains the 'academic infrastructure'
- Reviews institutions and programmes through audits and academic review (including overseas and collaborative activities)
- Advises UK government (s) on applications for degree awarding powers and university title
- Offers advice on academic quality and standards matters

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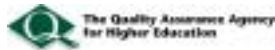
The development of subject benchmark statements

Purpose
- to meet the need for benchmark information on a subject basis about the standards of HE awards to make them more explicit and accessible to the public
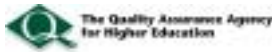
Process
- QAA as facilitator, subject communities, including academics and professionals as main actors ensuring ownership of the standards
- Benchmark groups beyond the pilot stage were given a common brief and were invited to draft 'threshold' standards (for Honours Bachelor degree) but most identified 'typical' standards
- All groups were given indicative headings for each section of their statement
- 65 statements exist at Bachelors level with two at Masters level

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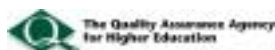
The development of institutional audit (England)

- Partners involved
  - the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
  - UniversitiesUK
  - The Standing Conference of Principals of Colleges of Higher Education (SCOP)
- Endorsement from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
- The provision of information on quality and standards in higher education by institutions themselves

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The principles of institutional audit

- Institutional responsibilities
  - The quality and standards of awards
  - The enhancement of teaching and learning
  - Reliability of public information
- A 'peer review' process
- Based on evaluation of evidence
- Summative judgments on academic standards and the quality of student learning experience
- Reports are published and made widely available

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The audit process

- Scope
  - The effectiveness of internal quality assurance structures
  - The accuracy, completeness and reliability of information
  - Experience at the programme level (discipline audit trails)

- Focus
  - Outcomes of internal reviews
  - Use of external reference points (FHEQ; benchmarks etc)
  - Publicly available information on quality and standards (programme specifications)
  - Experience of students

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Findings so far?

- Recently published key features and findings of the first eight new institutional audits
- Key features
  - Format and outcomes of discipline audit trails
  - Frequency and focus of thematic enquiries
  - The nature and use of written submissions from student representative bodies
- Key findings

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QAA future work: some highlights

- More systematic reviewing and commenting on implementation and impact of processes – the 'reflective' practitioner
- Development of new Collaborative Provision Audit process (currently out for consultation)
- Updating of sections of Code of Practice - already begun
- Development of review process for subject benchmark statements and consideration of extension to Masters degree level
- Greater international collaboration

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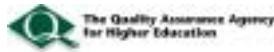
What is the context in which QAA continues to work?

- Increasing and conflicting Government interest/intervention
- New Funding Councils' strategies
- Consequences of 'market forces' for quality
- Institutional responsibilities and powers
- Devolution of powers to Scottish and Welsh Assemblies
- Internationalisation of higher education and quality assurance, including the Bologna Process in Europe

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More information from

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