

# Quality assurance and enhancement in UK higher education

Carolyn Campbell  
Head of International Affairs  
[c.campbell@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:c.campbell@qaa.ac.uk)



**QAA**

# Overview of higher education in the UK [i]

- Shape and size
  - Four systems
  - Diversity in higher education institution size, mission and provision
  - Autonomy and independence
- Degree awarding powers and university title
- Funding

# Overview of higher education in the UK [ii]

- Structure of programmes and qualifications
- The Academic Infrastructure
- Quality assurance: two levels
  - Internal quality assurance
  - External quality assurance

# The history of QAA and evaluation in UK HE

- Quality assurance before 1990
- The Academic Audit Unit 1990-1992
- Quality Assurance 1992-97: The Higher Education Quality Council and the higher education funding councils
- QAA 1997 to present day

# The Quality Assurance Framework comprises

- the 'Academic Infrastructure'
- published information about quality and standards in individual institutions – teaching quality information ([www.unistats.co.uk](http://www.unistats.co.uk))
- student surveys
- regular institutional audits and reviews

# An overview of the QAA

- Official status
- The QAA Board of Directors
- Organisational structure
- Finance
- Relationship with other organisations

# QAA

*safeguards the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and informs and encourages the continuous improvement in the quality of HE by:*

- conducting external reviews and audits in universities and colleges
- describing clear academic standards in the Academic Infrastructure
- advising government on applications for degree awarding powers and university title
- offering advice on academic standards and quality.

# How we define academic 'standards' and 'quality'

- **academic standards** are predetermined and explicit levels of achievement which must be reached for a student to be granted a qualification
- **academic quality** is a way of describing the effectiveness of everything that is done or provided (the 'learning opportunities') 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



# What is the 'Academic Infrastructure'?

- a Code of Practice
- two qualifications frameworks (England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Scotland)
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications

Developed in consultation with the UK HE sector

# The Code of Practice

- ten sections
- principles of good practice with explanations
- key point of reference for the conduct of all QAA audits and reviews
- key point of reference for institutions

# Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

- HE qualifications awarded by universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are at five levels.
- Certificate, Intermediate, Honours, Masters and Doctoral levels.

# Subject Benchmark Statements

- set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas
- define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject
- do not represent a national curriculum in a subject area.

# Programme specifications

- provide concise description of the programme
- provide information to students and other interested parties including employers.

# 6 basic quality assurance questions

- what are you trying to do?
  - why are you doing it?
  - how are you going to do it?
  - why is that the best way to do it?
  - how do you know it works?
  - how can you improve it?
- |               |
|---------------|
| PURPOSES      |
| REASON        |
| METHOD        |
| OPTIMISATION  |
| EFFECTIVENESS |
| ENHANCEMENT   |

# **Institutional audit 2006: England & Northern Ireland**

- is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review
- at the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning
- processes are defined in the Handbook for Institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006

# Institutional Audit 2006

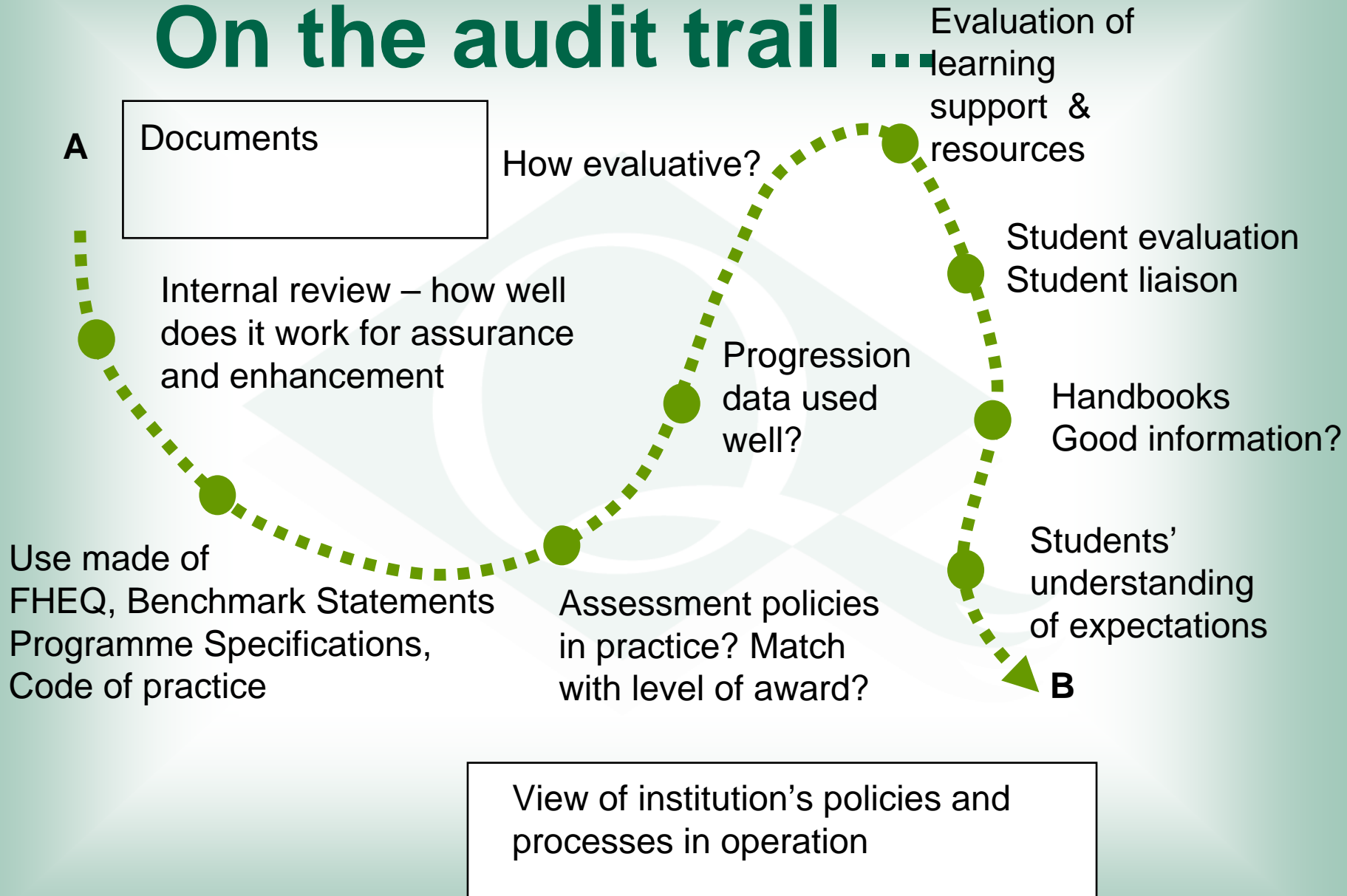
- two judgements
  - academic standards and learning opportunities
- audit trails
- Commentaries, including on enhancement
- revised approach to reporting
- mid cycle follow up



# Institutional audit and enhancement

- “enhancement is defined as the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities” (Institutional audit handbook p11)
- “the focus on institutional approach to quality enhancement covers use of external examiners, internal and external review, the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, students as partners in quality enhancement, management information, dissemination of good practice, staff development and reward, and other relevant topics.” (Institutional audit handbook p3)

# On the audit trail ...



# The judgements

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the **academic standards of its awards**
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the **quality of the learning opportunities** available to students

# Confidence statements

- confidence
- limited confidence
- no confidence

# The Report and its Annex

## Report

- **Summary** - judgements, comments, recommendations, features of good practice
- **The Report** – seven section headings

## Annex to the report

- same section headings as in the report but more detailed information

# Mid cycle follow-up

- an integral part of the overall institutional audit
- paper-based exercise
- institutional commentary on
  - action taken to address recommendations in the audit report and in any other QAA reports since the audit
  - significant changes in collaborative arrangements since the audit.
- sampling of internal review reports
- report by QAA to institution and HEFCE.

# Engagement with the sector

- QAA Liaison officer scheme
- Annual meeting of subscribing institutions
- Conferences, round tables and workshops
- *Higher Quality and Quality Update International*
- Advisory Groups on reviewing elements of the Academic infrastructure
- Advice and information on quality and standards.

# QAA's enhancement activities include

- Thematic briefings
  - *Quality matters*
  - *Outcomes from institutional audit*
  - *Enhancement themes*
- Sharing good practice
  - *Overview reports – 'Learning from.....'*



# Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?

- A joint HEFCE-QAA-HEA report

*“The main driver for a move to a higher profile for quality enhancement has been the natural development of the institution, informed by the most recent audit report”*

*“The institutional audit report was an important driver for change”*