11th European Quality Assurance Forum

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Quality in context – embedding improvement

Paper proposal form

Deadline 25 July 2016

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max): Anniina Wikman has recently been appointed as the Senior Policy Advisor (Academic Partnerships) at University College London, where her main area of responsibility is to develop and maintain the quality assurance framework for academic partnership activity across the University. Previously she has worked at the University of East London as the Partnerships Manager in the Quality Assurance and Enhancement team, leading on a number of quality assurance initiatives to align the University's practice around academic partnerships with the UK Quality Assurance Agency's updated Quality Code for Higher Education. Ms Wikman is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK and holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Abo Akademi University, Finland.

(If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.)

If you are submitting a paper or workshop proposal, please do not register for the event online until the results of the selection process have been announced. Each selected paper and workshop at EQAF 2016 will benefit from one reduced fee, which will be applied through a special registration process.

After the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.

Proposal

Title: Developing engaging Quality Assurance policies – a practice-based case study

Abstract (150 words max): What should be taken into account when developing University Quality Assurance policies to ensure maximum engagement leading to successful implementation? How could the resistance for developing *yet another* QA policy be minimised through stakeholder engagement at the policy

development stage? This paper looks at the development processes of three policies at the University of East London and how the stakeholders, 'the implementers', of those policies were engaged in the development process. The policies are ranked based on the complexity of stakeholder engagement, i.e. the level of resistance the development of the policies met, and what actions were taken to address the different levels of complexity to ensure that the policies would be implemented successfully.

The paper is based on: practice

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

The definition of 'policy' according to the *Oxford Dictionaries* is **"**a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or individual". The work of quality assurance professionals and academics in higher education institutions involves not only developing quality assurance policies ('courses of action' for the university), but also ensuring that they are appropriately and consistently implemented across the institution. The "QA team" is responsible for ensuring that standards are met across the institution and for this purpose initiate and lead on the development of policies and practices. The role of the team is subsequently to advise colleagues at the institution on the implementation of those policies. New "QA requirements" might encounter resistance from colleagues, both in professional services and the academic faculties, to implement any new processes or policies as these might be seen as unnecessary bureaucracy or extra work additional to their core activities.

This paper looks at the development processes and lessons learned from the development of three new quality assurance policies of varying levels of complexity relating to academic partnership activity at the University of East London, UK. The paper seeks to discuss how actions taken to engage stakeholders at the policy development stage could help to ensure that the policies are implemented successfully.

Three practice-based case studies

In the 2015-2016 academic year, three new quality assurance policies relating to academic partnership activity were due to be introduced at the University of East London. The requirement for their introduction came both from the updated indicators of sound practice by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and from individuals and teams within the university, and the development of the policies was the responsibility of the University's central QA team.

Policy A: <u>Partner marketing and publicity</u>

One of the expectations to be met was to ensure that the University had *"effective control over the accuracy of all public information, publicity and promotional activity relating to learning opportunities delivered with others which lead to their awards. Information is produced for prospective and current students which is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy -"* (UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others, Indicator 18). This requirement was to be met through the development of a policy for the approval of marketing and publicity material by a partner institution (the development of the policy was based on an out of date version that required extensive updating). The updated policy would include guidelines for the partner

institutions on how to market the collaborative programmes as well as outlining a review process whereby the University would monitor and review the partner institutions' publicity material to ensure it accurately described the University's award as well as ensuring that all publicity made in the name of the University was appropriate.

The updated policy also needed to reflect the legal partnership agreements that were in place with the partner institutions. The relevant departments (Governance and Legal Services and Communications) within the University were consulted at a meeting and they were asked to sign off the policy once it was completed. This policy was both developed and implemented by the QA team (with minor input from the Communications team), so no wider consultation or training was held within the University. After the policy had been internally agreed by the relevant University Committee, communication was sent to the partner institutions as well as the relevant academic and support service staff within the University for their information.

Policy B: Collaborative student entitlements

Another requirement to be addressed by the University concerned the clarity of information available to students studying at partner institutions on what student support services they were entitled to access at the University. The relevant QAA indicator of sound practice requires that "*governance arrangements at appropriate levels are in place for all learning opportunities which are not directly provided by the degree-awarding body. Arrangements for learning to be delivered, or support to be provided, are developed, agreed and managed in accordance with the formally stated policies and procedures of the degree-awarding body*" (UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others, Indicator 2). This policy would affect all student support service teams at the University and the partner institutions, and would also have some resource implications.

The policy development process started with an internal working group consisting of representatives from the University student support teams and members of the QA team. It was decided that an audit of all partner institutions' current student support service provision was required to be used as a basis for the University's discussions on what was required in practice and how that could be delivered. The audit was also a way of informing the partner institutions that a policy development process to clarify collaborative student entitlements at the University was going to take place. Parallel to the audit, some market research was carried out by the QA team, scoping the arrangements in place across the sector. Additionally, as with Policy A, the current legal agreements with the partner institutions were looked at to review any legal obligations that would affect the policy development.

The outcome of the audit as well as the market research activity indicated which student support services should be provided by the University and which the partner institutions would need to provide themselves, and consequently a policy was developed. The policy was sent to the heads of all the relevant student support teams within the University for consultation. Simultaneously, communication to the partner institutions and collaborative students was prepared separately to ensure that the student-facing information was as user-friendly as possible. After the consultation period for the internal policy ended, appropriate amendments to the documents were made and each partner institution was sent their Collaborative Student Entitlement Letter to be forwarded to their students. The final version of the internal Collaborative Student Entitlement Policy was also distributed to the relevant teams within the University. Both partner institutions and the University

teams were informed that a review of the supporting documentation would take place at the end of the first year of operation of the policy.

Seven months into the academic year, a review of the operation of the policy was launched to capture feedback in time for the following academic year. A feedback request was sent to the heads of the relevant University teams on the internal policy and a separate request to the partner institutions on the operation of the Collaborative Student Entitlement Letter. Based on the feedback from all parties, the documents and communication processes were amended where appropriate. A report on the review of the operation of the policy was submitted to the relevant University Committee.

Policy C: <u>The role of the academic Link Tutor</u>

The main role of the academic Link Tutor in academic partnership activity at the University was to ensure that the subject-specific academic standards and quality of the collaborative programmes were maintained. In order to ensure consistency in the practice of the Link Tutors across the University, a 'Link Tutor role description' was developed to outline the purpose and key responsibilities of the Link Tutors in assuring the academic quality of the partnership. A role description was already in existence but was not widely implemented and required updating.

The development of the new role description started with the establishment of a Link Tutor Forum, the purpose of which was to provide peer support to Link Tutors, to share best practice and to ensure that Link Tutors were aware of the support provided by professional services to them in implementing the Link Tutor policy. At the first meeting of the Link Tutor Forum the main task was to discuss and agree the proposed new role description. Amendments were agreed and discussed, and the QA team also noted that additional support documents would be provided to the Link Tutors to help them plan their workload and allocation of time for the implementation of the activities in the policy. Subsequently a template for a calendar of activities was developed by the QA team for the Link Tutors.

The updated and agreed role description was approved at the relevant institutional Committee, and circulated to all Link Tutors. A formalised process for inducting new Link Tutors was established to ensure that they became familiar with the policy from the beginning and knew what support was available to implement it. It was also agreed together with the Link Tutors that the role description was 'live' and would be reviewed at each Link Tutor Forum so that it would remain appropriate and relevant.

Conclusion – lessons learned

The main lesson learned, however obvious, was accepting that the development and implementation of the new policies would not be a priority for colleagues outside the QA team. Accepting this was key to engaging stakeholders with the new policies – the focus was not on figuring out how the policies could best be 'forced' to be implemented (for example through heavy monitoring) but on involving and engaging the stakeholders throughout the development process. Even though the policies would have to be put in place 'no matter what', as not doing so would put the university at risk of not meeting external and internal quality assurance requirements, the aim was to steer away as much as possible from a dictating approach. Aiming to ensure that the policies and practices would be seen as helpful, not only as necessary, formed the basis for the development of the policies, and engaging stakeholders as much as possible was seen as key.

The complexity of the three policies that were developed in terms of implementer engagement is described in the following table, where the higher number represents the more complex situation:

	Responsibility for implementation 1) policy developer 2) someone other than the policy developer	*Aim of the policy* 1) formalising current practice 2) changing current practice/introducing new practice	*The requirement for the development of the QA policy* 1) the need to improve practice identified by the implementer 2) external to the university 3) the need to improve practice identified by someone other than the implementer
Policy A	1	2	2
Policy B	2	1	1
Policy C	2	2	3

Communication

In the case of all three policies, understanding why the policy was implemented was the first stage of the development process. To maximise engagement with the policy, providing information and details on why the policies were developed, beyond 'meeting external quality assurance requirements', was considered to be the first stage of any communication. This included explaining *why* the external requirements had been put in place, and what benefits they would bring or what risks they would mitigate. The robustness of the introduction depended on the expected resistance the new policy would meet among the implementers. For Policy A this was not a problem as the main implementer of the new policy was the same team who developed it, with minor input from one other team, whereas the rationale for Policy C required more detailed and clear explanation as it would be fully implemented by others, it introduced new practice as well as changing current practice and the need for the policy was identified within the university, but by someone other than the implementer of the policy.

Communication on the development of the new policies in general was a key part of the process in all cases. Ensuring that all the relevant stakeholders were aware of the development of the policies as early on as possible helped gain support for the introduction of the new policies and ensured that no contradictory practice was being developed simultaneously elsewhere within the University. Also, at this stage any varying practice or knock-on effects of the new policy could be identified and could be considered in the development process to ensure that there was no existing practice or requirements that would contradict the new policy.

Once the policies had been developed, extensive communication was sent out again to all relevant stakeholders and committees to ensure that all the stakeholders were aware of the new policy and practice that would follow. To further maximise the relevant

stakeholders' engagement with the policy and to maintain momentum, regular updates were sent out throughout the development process.

Consultation

Listening to the views of the policy implementers and engaging them with the development process of the policy were the single most important part of the process in the development of all the policies. Again, the more complex the policy was, i.e. the more resistance it was expected to meet, the more opportunities for consultation and expressing views on it were provided to ensure maximum engagement with the implementation of the policy in the future. For the most straightforward Policy A, a meeting was only held with the team that would have a minor role in supporting the QA team in implementing it. Policy B required further consultation as it was to be implemented by someone other than the policy developer, but as the requirement for the policy to be developed had come from the teams that would implement it and it was expected to simply formalise existing practice, the consultation was done electronically.

For the most complex Policy C a face to face consultation was arranged in the form of a 'forum' where the policy was discussed thoroughly between the policy developer and the implementers, resulting in a compromise on the content of the policy that would take all the requirements into account as comprehensively as possible. Had Policy C been introduced in the form it was proposed to the implementers at the forum, without taking into account their views, but with the rationale that due to 'quality assurance requirements' it had to be implemented as such, this would have most likely lead to it either not being implemented at all or only partially. Even if the extensive consultation lead to a compromise which did not necessarily 'tick all the boxes' in the exact way the QA team would have wanted it to, it was felt that if the policy was implemented effectively in the renegotiated form, it would be more beneficial than not being implemented at all. The positive dialogue also opened the possibility for further review and development of the policy with the implementers in the future.

Preparing for implementation

As mentioned earlier regarding communication, understanding the effects of the new policy on other practice within the University was vital in order for the policies to be implemented successfully, as the implementers of the policies would understandably feel frustrated trying to implement the new policies if they were contradicted other practice within the University or other external requirements. The risk for this was higher with Policies A and C, as they introduced new practice or changed current practice.

Developing supporting documentation for the implementation of the policies proved to be good practice especially with Policy C. As the implementers of this policy expressed uncertainty on whether they would be able to successfully implement it in terms of their current workload, developing tools to simplify and support the implementation of it provided reassurance.

Review

Already at the beginning of the development of Policies B and C, all the communication included reference to a review, in terms of collecting feedback from implementers, which would take place once the policies had been in place for a while. Policy C, owing to its complexity in terms of the implementer engagement, was to be reviewed at least annually

face to face together with the implementers. This practice was aimed to improve engagement of the implementers as they would have an opportunity to feedback regularly on any issues or extra support that may be required. The less complex Policy B was reviewed after the first year of operation based on feedback, and as the feedback was positive on the whole, fell into the standard annual review process.

References:

The Quality Assurance Agency: UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others

Discussion questions:

What challenges can be encountered when developing new policies to be implemented by others to meet external, or internal, quality requirements?

What would be the best way to ensure that QA policies are embedded and implemented appropriately across the institution?

What practice have you used to engage colleagues across your institution in the development of new QA policies and practices?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.