Quality assurance and the learning journey:
the value of monitoring progress for the student experience
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the aims of UK quality assurance (QA) within institutions should be concerned not only with the requirements to provide a profile of programmes, institutions and their accomplishment, but also to support individual student development.

The UK QA model provides wide ranging information which is of great importance in a competitive market. However, whilst current systems provide detail of course content, structure, teaching and assessment, they also have valuable potential for the analysis of individual student achievement.

The question is can we develop the QA system to enable us (a) to monitor individual student progress and development over time; and (b) to develop feedback mechanisms that can help students to identify areas where improvement of learning and study skills are necessary? Ideally we should develop systems to assess and enhance individual student performance and its variation during the learning journey.

1.   Introduction

In the UK the extent and methods of quality assurance measurement have been driven by increasing demands for accountability. Originally those demands were from government, and the methods of quality assurance (QA) were seen as established outside the universities. Gradually, however, the universities have been able to exert increasing influence on the QA processes, and realised that these do not challenge their independence and but that this demand for accountability is of value not only for government, but also for employers, parents and potential students. Hostility to QA processes is slowly diminishing as universities seek information for selling themselves in the competitive international market for students, staff, and research income.

My intention in this paper is to argue, in agreement with Brennan and Shah (2000), that the aims of quality assurance should be concerned not only with measurement at the national and institutional level, but also at the individual student level. I therefore describe here how components of the current QA process could be of value not only for management purposes, but also for measuring the progress of the individual student's learning journey through their years at the university.

2.   Evolution of quality assurance in the UK

The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), established in 1997, was a culmination of a decade of reform in the quality assurance of UK higher education. Previously, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had operated a quality

assessment process. This was always government driven, and universities tended to see it as interference with academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The initial QAA Subject Review system (operating until 2001) was a review of all disciplines and departments taught in universities. Its coverage was extensive, as shown in *Figure 1*, and it concentrated on academic discipline level teaching processes and the student experience.

Figure 1: Features of QAA subject review (until 2001)

Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
Teaching, Learning and Assessment
Student Progression and Achievement
Student Support and Guidance
Learning Resources
Quality Management and Enhancement

This national measure of quality was used as a metric for institutional teaching quality in league tables (e.g. Times Higher).

From this basis the current system of a 5-6 year cycle of reviewing was developed. Since then reviews have increasingly concentrated on quality enhancement and on engaging students at all stages of evaluation. But nowadays the quality framework is much more broadly based, as shown in *Figure 2*. It is concerned with the institution's mission, its teaching processes and standards, and with the student experience, and the quality of public information.

Figure 2. Assuring quality and standards - QAA 2012

The *new* QAA Quality Code (and its sub sections)

    A: Setting and maintaining threshold academic standards
        e.g. *assessment of achievement of learning outcomes*
    B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality
        e.g. programme design, student engagement
    C: Information about higher education provision
        e.g. *institution mission, values and strategy*

The Key information Set including the National Student Survey

Within this general framework institutions are given autonomy to adapt their own measures, as well as their own means of enhancing the student experience. Information from these systems provides the public and the media with a means to compare teaching quality in higher education institutions, so that outsiders can interrogate information and see if institution X is as good as, or better than institution Y, in terms of the measures provided. They help to satisfy external (government, employers, parents, etc) and internal concerns (students) that we are achieving what we claim.
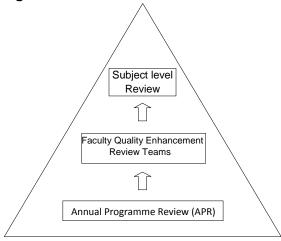
Despite the initial unpopularity of quality assurance requirements (THES editorial, 2001; Baty, 2001) they had a profound effect on the way learning and teaching is managed in UK universities. Gradually, as the universities realised that they had to

market themselves to potential future students, to future staff members, and to funders of all kinds, they have come to appreciate the value of much of the quality assurance information.

3. An example of institutional level Quality Assurance

In England, at the University of Bristol, we have produced our own methods for quality assurance, these systems have developed over time into rigorous academic processes based on previous results and audit findings, taking account of national and international discussions (Bologna Process), and are part of our overall educational strategy. They consist of a pyramid of review and monitoring of taught units and student feedback that form an annual programme at programme level, and up to a five year cycle at school or subject level (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3: Institutional level QA methods

These reviews provide evidence and regular measures of quality of performance and effectiveness which allow staff to make immediate or annual changes as appropriate.

There is, however, another question about quality and effectiveness which is not yet systematically addressed. That is the question of how well the management and delivery of student learning improves student performance and the ability to gain and use cumulative knowledge. At present our quality control measures look at overall course efficiency and comparability, with some consideration of the attainment of generic skills and meeting learning outcomes. But we also need within our own institution to measure the effectiveness of teaching in terms of individual student performance and experience.

4. Charting the quality of the individual learning journey at Bristol

In teaching we focus on making our students 'independent' learners[1]. The first year is regarded as a foundation period of assessment to find the gaps in students' knowledge and skills. At the beginning of that first year students receive details of the programme and unit aims, intended learning outcomes (ILOs), details of teaching and assessment methods, which we use as continuous measures of QA. That information allows the student to understand the key components of their programme and how they will be assessed. It assures us that both staff and students are aware of the full programme content and the skills and knowledge the student is expected to gain during their time with us.

We have devised end of teaching block/unit and mid-course measures to see how students feel about their teaching and the course, and to assess their progress (*Figure 4*). Such survey assessments can often result in immediate teaching changes, but usually tend to feed into end-of-course reviews, which result in annual course updates and alterations. So far this has been helpful, and it demonstrates to students and staff the value of quality measures and their effectiveness.

Figure 4: Student level QA methods

Year 1	Student feedback on teaching (at individual teacher and/or subject level)
Year 2	Annual surveys of student opinion: student focus groups/ questionnaires, etc
Year 3/4	National Student Survey (NSS)

The question still to be tackled is, '*what are the key features that affect the student learning journey and how successfully they reach the end?*' I suggest that the data we already collect may contain the necessary means of addressing this question.

The individual end-of-year student assessment is mostly used to inform students of their performance and as a measure for staff to ascertain how each student has gained the skills and knowledge which their programme is intended to provide. For quality assurance purposes most of the emphasis is on intended learning outcomes, via course content, structure and teaching methods.

However, linking these individual assessments across student years would provide a trajectory of attainment for each student across the whole period of the learning journey. It would show in which course components in any one year an individual student was weak, and how far that position was improved in the following year. In terms of *Figure 5,* for example, it would be possible to see where individual students were strongest and weakest at the end of the first year, and their rank order of achievement e.g. were they in the top or bottom tenth of ranking. It would then be possible to ask, in subsequent years, whether a student who was marked, for example, in the lowest tenth of scores in problem solving in the first year, had improved to a higher ranking in the second year. In that way weakness in individual performance could be identified and monitored. It would also be possible to build a

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[1] (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/internationalisation/ISL_Independent_Learning)

picture over time of how students had dealt with and responded to feedback on their work. Feedback mechanisms are therefore crucial in helping the students to identify areas where improvement of skills is necessary. Such feedback can be delivered in many ways, but academic tutors are key.

Figure 5 *Skills students should acquire as they progress through their course.*

	1st fortnight	Year 1 Block 1	Year 1 Block 2	Year 2	Year 3
Research	Set library exercise	Require research of alternative case references	Require research of secondary literature on a case	Require research of relevant primary and secondary sources in a given area of law. Students to produce bibliography and description of procedure adopted for finding refs.	Students to find relevant materials on a given topic (making use of indexes of journals, CD-Roms, databases) and write reflective description of research methods.
Problem solving	Engage in simple rule-fact application.	Discuss marking criteria. Set mid-sessional examination to include problem question.	Get students to solve standard (single-issue) problems	Get students to solve complex (multi-issue) problems, with potential law reform elements.	Get students to solve problems straddling conventional subject-boundaries.
Written communication	Direct students to materials relating to legal writing skills	Set case summary exercise with subsequent discussion of marking criteria.	Set written summary of relevant law. Set discursive essay.	Require students to engage in regular written preparation for class with peer-evaluation.	Students to produce 5,000 word account of specific legal topic
Oral communication	Discuss criteria for oral presentations and tutorial contributions.	Include 5 minute oral presentations on a given topic with self-evaluation.	Set informal moots and debates.	Include 10 minute structured presentations on a text with subsequent questions/debate.	Use seminar papers.
IT Skills, etc	Administer C&IT Questionnaire and offer remedial classes.	Require e-mail communication and attachments with tutor. Set computer-based court system test.	Set web-based research exercise on identified sites.	Set web-based research exercise on a variety of sites. Require use of on-line databases, such as Eur-Lex.	Expect regular and spontaneous location of on-line materials.
Teamwork	Introduce the academic community: collaboration and plagiarism.	Use 'snowballing' and group feedback in class.	Require joint preparation for class discussion.	Require joint production of written work for formative assessment.	Provide opportunity for collaboration.

Clearly there would be value in this for advice not only for individual students, but also for assessments of course and teacher effects. Linking trajectory data over two or more years from a year intake cohort would show how far the proportion of students attaining only flat or downward trajectories had been reduced during their whole degree course. Inter-cohort comparison (i.e. comparison of year intakes) would show the extent to which changes in course structure and teaching methods affected that picture.

In quality terms we have to ask how we can identify those who may find it hard to become independent learners, and find a means to assist their progress. We must try to ensure that the current student journey is the best we can offer, and a clear assessment and feedback framework has an essential role.

5.   Conclusions

In the UK the current quality assurance information requirements are valuable for institutions, enabling them to provide a profile of their programmes, the institution and its achievement. For all final year students the National Student Survey provides feedback on their experience and its evaluation by that cohort. The current quality information resource in the UK at the institutional level, helps students to understand the nature of the programme before they begin, and the content, potential opportunities and experiences, and assessment methods used within programmes. Information about post-university employment attainment helps prospective students to see the kinds of long-term prospects associated with each course. Currently for universities the value of QA data tends to be seen very much in terms of marketing for admissions and league table rankings.

However, the argument of this paper is that this new and extensive QA data has in addition valuable potential not just for the comparison of institutional performance, but also for the measurement of individual student performance and its change throughout their time at university. That would provide an innovative method of assessing teaching methods, and course content and structure. It may also perhaps help to convert our UK academic population from scepticism and even deep rooted opposition to QA, if it can be seen to benefit not just the course and the institution, but also the development of the individual student's learning journey.

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