

Quality News



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University of Antwerp and Arteis University College



‘Quality and Trust: at the heart of what we do’

The Sixth European Quality Assurance Forum was intended to be a return to ‘grass roots’ thinking about quality assurance in Higher Education through the theme of ‘trust’.

Fiona Crozier (Chair, EQA Forum Committee), who introduced the theme, questioned how far the different actors involved in quality assurance, including external agencies and the public, trusted each other while Prof Alain Verschoren (Rector, University of Antwerp), who welcomed delegates,

saw the different processes involved in quality assurance, from student evaluation questionnaires to forums and benchmarking, as dependent upon the trust that the various stakeholders had in them.

Professor Mala Singh (Open University), the first of the plenary speakers, attributed the strength and distinctiveness of European Quality Assurance to its participatory 'stakeholder' model although she was sceptical as to how far the democratisation of quality assurance processes reached down the line because some important partners, especially the academies, were often missing from the table. She argued that, in today's tight fiscal economies, the tension between the 'enhancement' and the 'regulatory' dimensions of quality assurance had led to a shift from 'soft' power (focused on self-regulation) to 'hard' power (more centralised, compliance driven and inspectorial).

Marion Coy, (former Director, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Ireland) returned to two 'grass roots' questions, 'Why do we evaluate HE?' and 'What is the best way of doing this?' She rejected the binaries in which Professor Singh worked - public and private, internal and external, and prescription and autonomy - as not reflective of 'real-life' and argued that one could not deny the primacy of politics in quality assurance. Asking the forum 'why those outside HE appear to have difficulty connecting with it?' she warned that, in the current global situation, there is a risk of government responding to extreme versions of what it thinks employers want. While Professor Singh stressed 'outcomes' as the most significant dimension of regulation in quality assurance and focussed on subject knowledge in relation to the work place, Coy stressed the relevance of education to citizenship.

Singh and Coy set the principal agenda item for the forum breakout groups, quality assurance in the context of the global fiscal downturn. There was a lot of interest in institutional performance being increasingly measured against public investment and in how this appeared to be driving an approach to quality assurance that is regulatory, quantitative and concerned primarily with

devising ways in which quality can be measured.

The third plenary speaker, Sjur Bergean (Head of the Higher Education and Research Division, Council of Europe) was interested in how HE was perceived as creating dense systems which were difficult for outsiders to understand. While he recognised the need to get the internal processes right, he questioned why HE was perceived as poor at external assurance and why there was a lack of public trust in the way HE addressed underachievement and underperformance.

Two breakout sessions on international education had most relevance for the University of Wales. Pdraig Walsh (Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board) and Andrea Bernhard (Research Assistant at the Department of Educational Sciences, University of Graz, Austria) addressed quality assurance as a difficult concept to capture in an international context. Each stressed the importance of trust in the accreditation processes. Walsh emphasised the importance of the award itself being highly regarded and how building an international reputation is a long term process. But it was Andrea Barnhard, who, in a packed breakout session, set the forum alight. Based on her recently completed doctorate, her paper located transnational education in the context of the global transformation of Higher Education which, in turn, involved massification, diversification, privatisation and internationalisation.

While some speakers stressed how internationalisation hindered quality assurance, Bernhard, drawing on case studies from Austria, Finland, Germany, U.K. and Canada, argued that internationalisation was a 'positive driver' in quality assurance processes.

Barnhard, like Walsh, emphasised the importance of quality assurance systems having 'credibility that travels'. But she spelt out why this was so important to Europe:

the importance and complexity of cross border education; the shift, internationally, from state centralised to institution-based approaches within strong national foci on accountability; the wide spread nature of Europe's stakeholder model; and the importance of the transnational labour market.

Topics that dominated the forum's closing session included: how much quality assurance was achieving in practice; whether there was a 'European' concept of quality assurance; the relationship between quality assurance, autonomy and public funding; the emergence in Europe

of risk-based quality assurance; quality assurance systems in which students might find it easier to become involved; and the relationship between accountability and accreditation. In discussions that followed the final plenary session, it was clear that for many delegates the forum had turned out to be not so much a return to grassroots as an insight into a future where external agencies who were responsible for the regulation of quality assurance had an arm responsible for accreditation and enhancement. Now there is a thought!

Professor Linden Peach
Dean of Arts & Humanities

Forthcoming events February / March 2012

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| 21 February | Access with Impact: Evaluation and Impact of Access and Outreach Activities
London
http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Events/Pages/AccesswithImpact.aspx |
| 22 February | A Student-Centred Approach to Developing the Content, Delivery, and Assessment of Research Process Modules: Insights and Evaluations of Student Retention
Cardiff
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/seminars/themes/tw047_cardiff_met |
| 28 February | Student Learning and Teaching Network: 9000 Ways to Engage Annual Student Conference
Birmingham
http://studentlandtnetwork.ning.com/events/9000-ways |
| 1 March | HEA workshop: Collaborative Partnerships for Islamic Studies in Higher Education
London
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/academyevents/CollaborativePartnershipsforIslamicStudiesinHigherEducationMarch2012 |
| 28-29 March | HEA Conference: What works? Student retention and success
York
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/28_29_March_2012_retention_conference |

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UW centres to discuss new guidance on student assessment

The most recent meeting of the University's Learning and Teaching Committee considered a range of new QAA consultation documents and policy papers. One of these (*Understanding assessment: its role in safeguarding academic standards and quality in higher education*) provoked a stimulating discussion amongst committee members. A key question to emerge was how best to ensure that latest research and policy developments on student assessment could be debated and engaged with across the spectrum of collaborative partners - and in particular the academic community.

The Committee suggested that one way to achieve this would be to use the QAA document as the basis for discussion at the next round of Joint Board of Studies (JBS) meetings in each partner institution. It was suggested that such a discussion could form the basis of a new learning and teaching 'enhancement theme' approach, where a new, relevant, and timely theme could be discussed each year as an agenda item.

This year's theme is especially relevant as student assessment and feedback continues to be an area of ongoing concern in universities, as evidenced by poor results on this question in the UK's National Student Survey (NSS), and the University's own internal survey. Some students regularly report lower levels of satisfaction on the quality of assessment feedback they receive on their work. By taking the opportunity to engage with best practice and QAA guidance on this theme at the JBS meetings around the world, it is hoped that University of Wales partner faculty members will be at the forefront of a push to improve assessment and feedback for its students.

This fits perfectly with the ambitions of the QAA guide, which suggests that a central plank of assessment "... should be an integral part of learning... that summative

as well as formative assessment can, and does, facilitate student learning." The guide goes on to offer pragmatic advice on the role of assessment from both the teacher and the student perspective. As it suggests: "For the student, individual pieces of assessment provide a source of motivation for study; they promote learning by providing feedback on performance and help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

For the lecturer, assessment provides an opportunity to evaluate the knowledge, understanding, ability and skills attained by different students. The overall profile of student performance offers useful information for assessing the effectiveness of course content and teaching methods, thereby facilitating improvement."

Said L&T Committee Chair Professor Simon Haslett, "This is timely and helpful advice from the QAA, and by tabling the guide paper as an agenda item at local JBS meetings, we are hopeful that it will stimulate a vibrant discussion amongst colleagues at our collaborative partner institutions."

It is hoped the initiative will achieve a 'first class' grade for UW centres, and it may offer an opportunity to share best practice from across the wide range of provision. "It could also form the basis for staff development events led by University Moderators," Professor Haslett added.

The full document can be accessed at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/UnderstandingAssessment.pdf>

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