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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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Proposal

Title: From teaching to learning: how quality assurance in UK higher education has responded to this shift by promoting a culture of enhancement

Abstract (150 words max):

This paper addresses the question of how the system of quality assurance in UK higher education has responded to the shift from teaching to learning by promoting a culture of



enhancement in higher education institutions. It contends that the adoption of approaches encouraging active learning by students has been mirrored by a shift in quality assurance methods, which have moved from compliance to enhancement, by requiring institutions to take deliberate steps to improve their provision. This has resulted in student engagement becoming a central expectation of reviews. This contention is supported by two illustrative case studies identified by QAA review methods.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

The context: Higher education in the UK

The system of higher education in the UK is one which devolves political responsibility to the administrations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Within this system, universities and bodies with degree awarding powers are autonomous and independent organisations. Devolution has resulted in a consequent divergence of educational policy, between the four countries, particularly in relation to tuition fees. However, the responsibility for regulating higher education throughout the UK is contracted to a single organisation, The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

UK higher education is a mass system and in common with other OECD countries, it has undergone this shift from an elite system within the last thirty years. According to Trow (cited in Parry, 2003, p.1) this occurs when student enrolments reach the 15 to 20% level, which UK higher education achieved between 1988 and 1993 (Parry, 2003). This transition was driven primarily by public behaviour (increased student demand) and was not accompanied, to a significant extent, by the changes to structural and institutional systems, usually cited as preconditions for achieving growth. The systemic changes necessary to support the increasing diversity of higher education were developed following the move to a mass system. Significantly, by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and the 2011 White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (DBIS, June 2011).

In September 2012, the system of funding undergraduate education in England changed from a block teaching grant from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to one where higher education institutions (HEIs), have the ability to determine their own tuition fees (up to a maximum of £9000 per year). Students are able to access loans from the Student Loans Company (SLC) to fund the tuition and maintenance costs of their undergraduate studies. In this system, grant funding from HEFCE has been retained for the strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVS).

This paradigm shift in the funding approach in England has resulted in a greater focus on the provision of information for prospective and current students, to ensure they understand the nature of the learning experience offered by different providers and are, therefore, able to make informed choices regarding what, where and how they study. The increased investment required from students, together with the problems of graduate unemployment caused by a global recession, place an emphasis upon an accurate understanding of the public information available regarding providers and the learning programmes offered. Key Information Sets (KIS) were introduced in September 2012, to provide programme level



information for potential students to inform their decisions about participating in higher education.

These policy changes have occurred concurrently with changes in pedagogy and practice in higher education, emanating from a more diverse student population with greater variations in their prior experience of education and curricula. These experiences incorporate new modes of delivery facilitated by technology enabled learning (TEL); curricula which enable multiple modes of engagement and particularly more diverse modes of assessment. Institutions themselves have also been proactive in embedding notions of student engagement, particularly encouraging students to be independent learners and co-producers of their learning. The resultant changes in teacher-student interaction, emanating from both innovation in the pedagogy of higher learning and the institutional infrastructure to support them, might be summarised as representing a shift towards a central focus on learning - rather than teaching - in curriculum design.

Consideration of these changes in pedagogy and practice, together with recent policy changes in UK higher education, raises questions central to the theme of this European Quality Assurance Forum, namely how have quality assurance processes adapted to respond to the changing educational environment, as a result of this shift from teaching to learning? This paper will articulate some of these questions and explore the related concepts (illustrated by institutional case studies), with particular emphasis upon:

- The role of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in quality assurance
- Changing approaches to teaching, learning and assessment
- The development of students as independent learners (and their role as researchers)
- The evolution of the infrastructure to support effective and engaged learning
- The importance of public information to inform student choice

The role of the QAA in quality assurance

The QAA was established in 1997 and is contracted by the funding councils of the four nations within the UK to safeguard the standards of UK higher education delivered at home and overseas. The types of review method used have varied since its inception; however, these have always been based upon peer review and the autonomy and independence of providers in the UK system of higher education is acknowledged by the QAA. The concept of peer review has included student reviewers as full members of review teams from 2005 (in Scotland) and from 2010 in the other countries of the UK, illustrating QAA's commitment to student engagement.

As the system of quality assurance has become established, with the concurrent development of reference points such as the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications



(FHEQ), subject benchmarks, and the UK Quality Code, the approach has moved from one of assuring the compliance of higher education providers (with published criteria) to one of promoting sector-wide enhancement, and it is this emphasis upon enhancement (the deliberate steps to facilitate improvement) that adds value to the role of the regulator.

Changing approaches to teaching, learning and assessment

Cross (1996) provides three conditions for excellence in teaching, learning and assessment: high expectations; student participation and involvement; and assessment and feedback. Chickering and Gamson (1987) also contend that good practice in undergraduate education should encourage contacts between students and faculty; develop reciprocity and cooperation among students; and use active learning techniques. This active learning approach was further articulated by Race (2010), who promotes helping students to develop ownership of the need to learn, and deepen their learning by coaching other students and assessing their own, and others, learning.

A basic principle of learning is the provision of timely feedback to learners; they need to know what they are trying to accomplish, and how near they are to achieving the goal. Formative assessment is at the heart of effective learning, and improving formative assessment improves learning, Taras (2002) argues that assessment and feedback is the weakest link in this triumvirate of expectations. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2004) emphasise that effective feedback helps clarify for students, what good performance is. Assessment of students' learning and the provision of feedback is therefore a crucial component of a programme of study.

The development of students as independent learners

Higher education is often distinguished from general and secondary education by its focus on independent learning. Scheduled learning and teaching activities typically feature alongside time in which students are expected to study independently. Independent study might include preparation for scheduled sessions, follow-up work, wider reading or practice. The relative amounts of time that students are expected to spend engaged in scheduled activities and independent study varies between courses.

The transition to higher education and the effective development of the required skills as an independent learner requires a structured learning programme, with appropriate academic support at each stage, so that the learner is able to progress and demonstrate the appropriate outcomes.

According to Candy (1991) independent learning is a method and educational philosophy in which learners take increased responsibility for their learning, and acquire knowledge by themselves, developing the ability to undertake enquiry and critical reflection. This definition places the responsibility for learning in higher education on students, but sees a central role for the curriculum in setting learning objectives and outcomes, and an active role for teaching staff to guide and shape the learning. Another dimension of independent learning is the conception of students as producers of knowledge rather than as mere consumers of knowledge (Neary, 2014).

This conception has informed the QAA's approach to student engagement in quality assurance processes, for example the inclusion of students as full members of review teams,



and the expectations of higher education providers in relation to student engagement are articulated in the Quality Code, Chapter B5. Student engagement (or effort) is widely recognised as a significant contributory factor in achievement (Schuller et al 2001). However, Gibbs (2010 and 2012) in his work on the *Dimensions of quality* is explicit in his conclusions that the number of class contact hours has very little to do with educational quality, but rather that the pedagogical model and the quantity and quality of independent study is what determines the value of the educational experience. This conclusion builds upon earlier research about surface and deep approaches to learning (Ramsden 1979). In European higher education this has been interpreted as student effort while in other countries, including the UK, this has been understood as student engagement in their learning (Trowler 2010). Action-learning, enquiry-based, problem-based and peer learning are approaches that all aim to involve students in the process of learning, as opposed to a more traditional knowledge transmission model, both within the classroom and independently.

The evolution of the infrastructure to support effective and engaged learning

The evolution of an infrastructure to promote the shift from passive learners in a teaching culture, to active participants in a learning culture, is dependent upon an understanding of what constitutes a 'quality' learning experience and how this can be determined. In the context of higher education, quality is about providing an environment that creates the potential for students to succeed in their studies. This is essentially a subjective matter, and is more commonly measured in a qualitative rather than a quantitative way, and by a range of factors that include:

- support for individuals' needs and entitlements
- the quantity, quality and timeliness of feedback on assessed work
- the transparency of assessment criteria
- access to learning spaces and resources such as libraries, laboratories or design studios
- the availability of information and communications technology as an aid to learning
- the extent to which the institution takes account of students' feedback in making continual improvements to existing provision.

A range of approaches to learning and teaching is in use across UK higher education. This flexibility and diversity allows providers to:

- be responsive both to individuals and to cohorts of students
- take account of the latest developments in educational research and technology
- deliver courses in the most appropriate ways for the subject or area of practice
- accommodate different modes of course delivery utilising technology enabled learning (QAA 2013)

The learner must be an active participant in this process, and alerting students to the expectations about mutual responsibilities for learning should be a function of the published information about each course.

The survey informing the NUS report on independent learning (2012a) finds that students also value the resources that support independent learning, both through the library and online.



The importance of public information to inform student choice

The increased marketisation of HE and the introduction of the Key Information Set (KIS) has led some higher education providers to review the way in which their curriculum offer is designed and described. The information provided includes the proportion of time spent on lectures, seminars and similar; independent learning; and time on placement (if applicable). Other data include students' overall satisfaction with the quality of the course, assessment practices and progression outcomes such as progression destinations, average salary and salary range.

Implicit within an analysis of the shift from teaching to learning and how quality assurance processes in the UK have responded to this changing dynamic, is a consideration of the implications of moving from an approach where the student is a passive recipient of knowledge, to one where the student is an engaged and active learner, making informed choices about their studies.

To support this informed choice, the QAA in consultation with other sector stakeholders, has published guidance documents for higher education providers and current and prospective students, to explain four aspects of the learning experience:

- Student workload
- Class size
- Teaching qualifications
- Responding to student feedback

These documents are available at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/research>

Accessible, reliable and trustworthy information is necessary to ensure that prospective students understand the nature of the learning experience they can expect on particular programmes from a higher education provider and enables applicants to make informed choices in the light of their career aspirations and preferred learning styles, ensuring that the investment they make will be based on an accurate understanding of what is offered. When publishing such information, providers should refer to **Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education**, which addresses how providers make available information that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The guidance relates to information about higher education provision that providers publish on their websites and in their promotional material, as distinct from the KIS required by HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI).

When presenting information, providers are encouraged to explain the learning experience offered in a way that emphasises the holistic and complementary nature of the various activities of which it is comprised, together with the supporting infrastructure (for example libraries, learning support centres and virtual learning environments). The particular approach used could be framed within institutional or departmental teaching and learning strategies.



Case studies

The following case studies are included as illustrative examples of how the shift from teaching to learning is having an impact on the practice within universities, with reference to the learning experience and quality assurance processes. They were identified as examples of good practice by the QAA when the Universities were reviewed in the academic year 2012- 13.

In the case of the University of Reading, the *Engage in Assessment* project shows how active learning is promoted and how the supporting infrastructure utilises online resources to support the development of more diverse, student-centred methods of assessment.

The case study of the University of Lincoln illustrates how the undergraduate student can be an active learner and ~~co~~-producer+of knowledge, working with academic staff in the design and delivery of programmes. This approach is in accord with the expectations of the Quality Code regarding student engagement, emphasising the shift from teaching to learning in quality assurance.

Case study 1: University of Reading IRENI report 2013

Example of good practice identified:

“The University offers excellent web-based multimedia support for staff in relation to assessment and feedback.”

Description of the project:

The 'Engage in Assessment' Project

This project aims to showcase the range of assessment methods currently being used in different disciplines at Reading and to explore new evidence-based approaches to support and enhance students' active learning through a diversification of assessment practices. Designing and implementing new methods of assessment is, however, a time-consuming process, so the project brought together a suite of resources online to enable staff to review their existing assessment practices and to support them in the design, delivery and evaluation of alternative methods of assessment. One of the core aims of the project was therefore to support staff in developing more diverse, student-centred methods of assessment based on sound pedagogy and evidence from a range of disciplines across the sector.

The design of the open-access Engage in Assessment website was informed by the Engage in Feedback project and it complemented the University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Priorities (2011-13), specifically in the following two areas:

- continue to adapt the curriculum, assessment and feedback to promote active student learning
- develop a clearer understanding of the changing needs of learners and how they are challenge.

Case study 2: University of Lincoln IRENI report 2012

Example of good practice identified:



“The impact of the ‘Student as Producer’ initiative on the enhancement of student engagement at all levels and on learning and teaching practice across the University”

Student as Producer underpins all aspects of student engagement at the University of Lincoln. There is a very clear acknowledgement that student engagement should go beyond just involvement and consultation, so that students have a direct input into decision-making processes.

These student engagement activities are supported by the University through the appointment of a Student Engagement Officer, working out of the Vice-Chancellor's Office and with strong links to the Students' Union, enabling the development of systematic schemes to embed this model of student engagement. These include input into student induction; a comprehensive student representation system; the creation of, and support for, a team of student advisers (including training); student-led committees; students as full panel members on quality committees; and students on staff appointments panels. The University has been successfully experimenting with new committee structures, based on a workshop model, to promote and support student involvement.

Student as Producer challenges and invites academics to get involved in debates around the complexity of links between teaching, learning and research in higher education. These debates are contextualised around the meaning and purpose of higher education: 'the idea of the University'.

The project has been developed over a sustained period and involving staff at all levels and students, leading to a strong sense of collective ownership across the institution. Student as Producer provides a critical, challenging and coherent framework through which to conceptualise research-engaged teaching in a language and format that academics appreciate and understand.

Student as Producer has built on advice and support from a QAA visit in 2008, which encouraged the University to develop this work. This support from QAA gave the staff involved confidence and motivation to carry on with further developing research-engaged teaching.

Further information on the case studies

<http://newlive.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/GoodPractice/Documents/GPKB-case-study-Reading.pdf>

<http://newlive.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/GoodPractice/Documents/GPKB-case-study-Lincoln-2.pdf>

Conclusion

In summary, this paper poses the view that the shift from teaching to learning, with the concomitant emphasis on active and independent learning by students, has been mirrored by a similar shift in quality assurance processes in the UK, where higher education institutions become more self-reflecting and active participants in review processes. This approach



reflects the expectation that as the quality assurance system has matured since 1997, institutions will engage with enhancement by taking deliberate steps to improve their performance, and **Enhancement** is now one of the judgement areas of Higher Education Review (HER), applied to all publicly funded providers and to HER (Plus), the method applied to privately funded providers.

This shift has occurred concurrently (in the UK) with the growth of student numbers and increased tuition fees, combined with a policy imperative to place students at the heart of the higher education system. The resultant mass system of higher education means that student cohorts are more diverse and will have experienced a range of prior educational experiences which can make the transition to higher education a challenge. The expectation that a student will function effectively as an independent learner, is one which needs active support from the institution, throughout the course of study. Becoming a co-producer of learning can create tensions for both students and staff, as the nuanced relationship based upon mutual trust and respect is developed, and both have to engage with notions of the ownership of knowledge and how this is embedded in processes of programme approval and delivery.

In presenting a discussion of how quality assurance in UK higher education has responded to the shift from teaching to learning by promoting a culture of enhancement. The following four issues are central to the views articulated and have a general applicability to quality assurance outside the UK:

- The role of national quality assurance agencies in promoting a culture of enhancement
- How changing approaches to teaching, learning and assessment develop students as independent learners and co-producers of knowledge
- The importance of appropriate infrastructures to support effective and engaged learning being put in place by providers
- The importance of transparent and accurate public information being available to inform student choice

Future challenges are likely to focus on how these issues are interpreted by QA systems engaging with increasingly diverse higher education providers (public and private) and how the needs of students are met in expanded global higher education.



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Questions for discussion:

How can undergraduate students be supported in engaging effectively in their role as producers of knowledge?

What implications does this role have for curriculum design?