

Personal View: Teaching Quality Assessment and How to Survive It

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN THIS decade is reviewed it seems certain that 'quality' will be one of its 'buzz-words'. Having existed quietly in the manufacturing industry for many years (e.g. BS5750), it has more recently been transported to the world of education. Standing alone, the word 'quality', has several definitions (*nature, property, attribute, social status, grade of goodness and excellence*), and it is perhaps the last two that are relevant to the present context. Unfortunately, we all tend to interchange our meaning for these according to our immediate intention. This does not usually constitute a problem because the sense is apparent.

To ensure quality (the requisite level of goodness, or excellence) three facets are necessary. These are defined below, in the educational context, to avoid some of the confusion that has arisen concerning them.

- *Quality control*—mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision.
- *Quality audit*—external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place.
- *Quality assessment*—external review of, and judgements about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions.

In simplified terms 'control' covers your own in-house systems; 'audit' is an examination of those systems, but the bottom line is 'assessment' which is a measure of an institution's output (overall teaching and learning quality) and, indirectly, an evaluation of 'control' and 'audit'. The present article concentrates solely upon quality assessment and aims to dispense some useful information and advice to assessors and assessees alike.

A further area of potential misunderstanding is the popular adoption of the phrase 'teaching quality assessment', which in fact does not strictly exist. The correct description is 'assessment of the quality of education', which, naturally, encom-

passes much more than the teaching function. Since teaching is regarded as complementary to research which has been evaluated already, such usage is reasonable but problems may arise as a consequence (see later).

At the outset, it is appropriate to identify my own perception of the assessment exercise so that the bias, where it exists, may be understood. I firmly believe that quality assessment is a thoroughly good thing. Teaching and the entire educational experience in higher education have been neglected for far too long, to the detriment of everyone. In the long term, I expect that the principal objective of an overall improvement in quality will be achieved. In the shorter term, I have little doubt that numerous opportunities for the cross-fertilization of examples of good practice will be grasped. Even if the exercise were terminated now, a considerable amount of progress would have been achieved by virtue of the increased attention to teaching. It is readily conceded that there are frailties in the present system, but surely this is to be expected in such an enormous undertaking which, due to government pressure, has had to be set in motion so rapidly. Secondly, it is very much an evolving process which will continuously develop with experience. I sense that some are protesting too much. Perceptions of quality are common facets of everyday life, often with significant ramifications. The final caveat pertains to the authority of this writer. Twenty-five years teaching in four quite disparate universities, a keen interest in teaching and syllabus content and some experience as a Specialist, and a Reporting Assessor for the present assessment exercise is, I would contend, a suitable qualification for peer-assessment but I would prefer not to comment further! It is also germane to note that the majority of Specialist Assessors are also involved in the provision of education and will themselves be under scrutiny at some stage.

BACKGROUND

The Further and Higher Education Act, 1992, demolished the binary line between universities and polytechnics in the UK and brought about the demise of their respective funding bodies. Four new Funding Councils were established—one for Wales covering HE and FE; one for Scotland for HE, one each for HE and FE in England. Attention here, is directed to the English system, HEFCE.

Section 70 of the Further and Higher Education Act places upon the HEFCE the statutory obligation that it shall:

secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided by institutions for whose activities it provides, or is considering providing, financial support under this Part of the Act.

In short, the Council has to evaluate quality of education, by means to be determined by itself, in the vast majority of educational establishments in England. Reports of assessments will be published and will be used to influence funding allocations.

Following a series of pilot quality assessments in the spring of 1992, the framework of the methodology for achieving this objective was evolved and is described in HEFCE Circular 3/93 [1]. It was decided to approach the task on a subject-by-subject basis and the entire exercise should take around five years to complete. During this period much development and refinement will undoubtedly take place as all parties benefit from experience. The first four subjects to be assessed are chemistry, history, law and mechanical engineering, with a second group consisting of architecture, business and management, computer science and social work following closely behind.

HOW IT WORKS

When in full operation, the assessment procedure will involve institutions that offer a subject under review being invited to rank the quality of their offering as excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. In effect, only the first two categories are likely to be used.

A central pillar of the exercise is the submission document, the Institutional Self-Assessment (ISA), in which the case for excellent or satisfactory is presented. For the former, only those which established a *prima-facie* case for excellence, in the opinion of assessors within the Quality Assurance Division of HEFCE, will receive a visit from the assessment team. This important decision is reached by analysis of the ISA using a template which enables the assessor systematically to evaluate the evidence available. If the initial reader finds contrary to the claim a second review is undertaken. Those institutions that fail this initial hurdle will not be visited and will be graded as satisfactory irrespective of their claim. Although representa-

tions may be made and considered by a new team, it seems unlikely that the original decision will be changed. I expect that this decision, based upon paperwork, will prove a real pressure point in the system. It does highlight the extreme importance of the ISA (which is restricted to ten pages plus statistical indicators) and the need to provide tangible evidence to substantiate the claims made. Details of the suggested ISA format are provided in the HEFCE Circular 3/93 and subsequent advisory letters. Those institutions which consider that the quality of their provision falls into the satisfactory range are unlikely to be visited unless it is for 'comparator' purposes. If, for any reason, there are grounds for concern that quality may be at risk, there will be a visit.

A typical Visiting Assessment Team will usually contain a Reporting Assessor, who organizes and manages the visit, and three or four Specialist Assessors, knowledgeable in the subject under scrutiny, with an academic or industrial background. These assessors have been selected by HEFCE from proposals from Institutions and responses to national advertisements. They have received some three days of training in the quality ethos, with particular attention on assessment skills, analysis of ISAs and the protocols of the visit. It is expected that each specialist assessor will carry out four or five visits over a period of about a year.

Immediately, at the end of a visit, the findings of the assessment team are presented verbally to the host institution. Within two weeks, a draft of the formal report is submitted for factual correction, if appropriate, and, after any amendment, this constitutes the published report on the assessment. There is no appeal. The arrangements for reporting of the first round of assessments in the summer of 1993 also involved a fuller feedback report given to the institution. This document was confidential.

THE VISIT AND THE QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Prior to the visit itself, the Reporting Assessor will have tailor-made, as far as possible, an assessment team suitable for the host department in terms of courses offered, connections, geography, etc. A 'pre-visit' is generally made to establish contact and to explain the requirements of the exercise. The full team usually assembles on a Monday evening and the findings are presented verbally late on Thursday afternoon. (For an atypical institution such as the Open University, the process is prolonged and includes visits to the centre, the regions and, if appropriate, to summer schools.) What happens in the frenetic interim is described later in this article, but the following paragraphs might contain some useful advice for those being assessed.

Receiving institutions should regard the visit seriously irrespective of their standing and self-esteem. It should be viewed as a constructive

learning experience for both parties—not as an inquisition, with prosecutors and defendants. Certainly, the HEFCE's attitude, and that of the assessors of my acquaintance, falls firmly in the former camp. Do try to be as helpful as possible in, for example, the provision of meeting rooms. Assessor will almost certainly be lost on your campus and a little careful planning could save valuable time. Ensure that the classes scheduled on the timetable will actually run during the week of the visit. Above all, be honest. Do not attempt to gloss, evade or obfuscate. At least half of the panel will be academics, sympathetic to your difficulties since they probably experience them also, but at the same time they may have actually invented any 'sleight of hand' you might be tempted to employ. Remember, at the end of the visit it is likely that members of the panel will know more about your department than the majority of your own staff!

As much as any visit is likely to match another, the following are typical ingredients. The assessment panel meeting on the Monday evening is to allot prime responsibilities (e.g. curricula and objectives, facilities, student support and progression, staff and staff development) to individual members who then have the responsibility of writing about these topics. All members contribute to all sections, if appropriate, and everyone sits in on classroom/laboratory activities. In total, around 30 sessions are observed, and these are also identified at this first meeting. Strenuous efforts are made to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible in relation to student level, lecturer and course. No class is observed by more than one assessor who attempts, with mixed success, to speak with the lecturer either before or after the lecture under observation.

After meeting representatives of the university, faculty and department early on Tuesday morning, the assessment process begins in earnest. Assessors are easily recognizable—inevitably clutching a map and a load of papers, hurrying around apparently at random and forever looking at their watches as they attempt to examine everything relevant to the educational offering of the institution. In addition to classroom observations, discussions are held with people from virtually every facet of the university, e.g. students (undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time, full-time), staff (technical and academic), employers, service staff (librarians, personnel, welfare, careers, staff development, building services). Clearly, differing emphasis is placed upon comments from different sources but the overall picture gradually evolves as the jig-saw pieces are brought together. The HEFCE provide useful documentation to ensure that the survey is comprehensive. Before and after dinner the panel meet, present and discuss their findings and begin to write. At the end of the second full day, it is probable that opinions will be firming and, where possible, confirmatory visits/observations/discussions will be planned for the final morning. Clearly, it is essential that the quality and robustness of the

assessment process itself should be as high as possible. A draft version of the short report is prepared in the final few hours of the visit when the pressure levels may approach breaking point, especially for the Reporting Assessor. During this period all facets of the assessment are considered and decision upon the final grading is reached. Such deliberations are taken extremely carefully, although any deficiency which is regarded as serious normally results in an unsatisfactory ranking. To do otherwise would likely prolong the unacceptable aspects on offer. Immediately afterwards, more tension (and, perhaps, even drama) is experienced when the report is presented verbally to the senior representatives of the host institution. The panel then disbands, with everyone feeling totally drained and as if they've been at this institution for weeks. My recommended antidote is violent exercise such as sport or gardening. The formal writing of the two reports can wait until next week!

WHAT IS QUALITY?

Without wishing to become embroiled in semantics, it could be that the erroneous use of the word 'teaching' will cause confusion. The essential ingredients of the quality of education in the present context are the inseparability of the teaching and learning experience, its management and support, the comparability with the institution's aims and objectives, and the match with the students' abilities, expectations and attainment. To refer to all these as simply 'teaching' (as we all do, because it is not research) will be misleading. Using this broader definition, there are numerous criteria by which Quality may be evaluated, i.e. learning support for facilities, calibre of staff and the opportunities for staff development, the extent of the 'value-added' to students and their output standards, the level of student and employer satisfaction, etc. Individual institutions may place varying emphasis on such ingredients and this will provide the flavour of the mission statement, compatibility with which will constitute a major test of quality. *A note of caution here for the hyperbolists amongst the authors of mission statements—does the institution/department really live up to your description?*

In regard to the grading, the HEFCE Circular 3/93 provides the guidelines for the definitions of excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory but, possibly, some personal interpretation may also be helpful. The formal descriptions are:

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| Excellent: | education is of a generally very high quality. |
| Satisfactory: | aims and objectives are being met and there is a good match between these, the teaching and learning process and the students' ability, experience, expectations and attainment. |

Unsatisfactory: education is not of an acceptable quality; there are serious shortcomings which need to be addressed.

Personally, I believe that the word excellent is, perhaps, a little too daunting although no doubt it will provide ideal advertising material. As a descriptor and a criterion, I would prefer 'thoroughly professional' or just 'very good', since I expect that the percentage achieving 'excellence' will be more akin to this and will be less exceptional than 'excellence' implies. Nevertheless, I readily concede the marketing standpoint. Excellence teachers will not, I imagine, need to possess the vocal standards of a Glenda Jackson or a Richard Burton! Whilst performance in the classroom or laboratory (planning, introduction, conclusion, pace, level, relevance, use of appropriate media, cross-referencing, student rapport and interaction, etc.) meet the narrow definition of teaching, they might well be described as the 'delivery phase'. However, as indicated earlier, the entire support system (standards of library, classroom, laboratory facilities, modernity of syllabuses, accommodation of student needs, tutorials, assessment and feedback, quality and availability of staff and the nature of the student-staff interaction) must also be taken into account.

A further consideration, which may often span the interface with accreditation is syllabus content, which may impinge upon the assessment of teaching quality when the compatibility with the mission is affected. For example, if the mission of a department is 'to produce broadly educated materials engineers' and its syllabuses contain no mention of ceramics, then fitness for purpose, and hence quality, is impaired. However, had the mission proclaimed that the department would produce, say, specialist metallurgists, no problem would have arisen on this point since the objectives of the mission were not breached. Clearly, this simple example may be translated to any subject (e.g. civil engineering with no structures; law with no tort; medicine with no physiology). I foresee this as a potentially contentious area but the critical test of compatibility with mission should suffice as long as the mission statement is clear. If not, this in itself is an impediment to excellence.

As an increasing proportion of HE departs from the traditional, full-time, single-subject route, combined studies, modularization, distance and open learning present additional challenges to quality assessment. I believe that the same criteria as described earlier are appropriate for evaluating the individual elements involved. However, it does not

necessarily follow that a combination of elements, each rated as excellent, will constitute an excellent whole. Again, compatibility with the overall objectives must be examined. The pieces of the jig-saw must all be available and in the correct position to produce the picture!

SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ASSESSOR?

Those with romantic inclinations might perceive the role of the Specialist Assessor as a knight in shining armour upholding the virtues of quality in academe. A modern day equivalent might be the receiver protecting the savings of investors in a bankrupt company. Forget both these notions! Remember instead, the fate of messengers bringing bad tidings, which in this exercise might be construed as two of the three possible rankings.

More seriously, there are factors which should be considered by would-be volunteers. First, the assessment process involves extremely hard work which must be carried out at a frenetic pace. Long hours are involved and an ability to write 'on-the-run' is a decided advantage. A sense of humour is also beneficial when your carefully planned schedule for the day collapses for the third time.

A good sense of direction, and possibly a compass, might save valuable time and stress. Flexibility and compatibility with your colleagues on the assessment panel is important. I've been fortunate so far but I can imagine quite horrendous situations as the pressure builds up. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an empathy with and a sympathy for the university system and all its present tribulations. That's not to say turn a blind eye to any deficiency but rather to be positive, supportive and constructive.

Specialist Assessors, of course, get paid for their services but anyone regarding this activity as a means of becoming affluent really does require treatment. Taking into account the necessary extensive prior reading, the time spent during the visit and the work involved in preparation of the final reports, pushes the hourly rate towards the level of the minimum legal wage. Quite senior people are involved in assessment, and I estimate that barristers and surgeons of equivalent status, would be charging at least twenty times as much. Nevertheless, being an assessor has its positive points. It is an exhilarating experience, a wonderful exercise in group dynamics, highly educational and, in the longer term, will undoubtedly contribute to an improvement in the standard of higher education. That's what it's all about, after all!

REFERENCE

1. Higher Education Funding Council, Assessment of the Quality of Education, Circular 3/93 (February 1992).

Professor Plumbridge first graduated in metallurgy from Manchester University in 1963, and remained there to study for his M.Sc. (1964) and Ph.D. (1966). His theses were concerned with vacancy decay and the kinetics of precipitation hardening processes in aluminium alloys. He continued on as a Post-Doctoral Fellow working on fatigue crack growth and fractography until 1970. Subsequently, he joined the Engineering Department at Cambridge University, investigating fatigue-creep interactions in low alloy steels. In 1973 he went to Bristol University as Lecturer in Metallurgy in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. His studies on fatigue-creep interactions were expanded to include stainless steel, nickel and titanium-based alloys. Valuable contributions were made in identifying the importance of dominant failure mode. Other work on fatigue crack growth assessed microstructure and liquid pressure effects. He was promoted to Reader in 1983. In 1987 he emigrated to Australia to the University of Wollongong (NSW) where he led the conversion of their Metallurgy Department to a Materials Engineering Department. The new integrated course was highly rated by accrediting professional bodies. He returned to the UK in July 1991 to his present position as Head of the Materials Discipline at the Open University. His most recent research projects include the high-temperature behaviour of engineering ceramics and the performance of soldered joints in electrical and electronic connections. In the education arena, he has published several papers on his proposals for future courses in engineering, notably the 2+2 approach, and also with regard to the role of materials in the engineering syllabus. During the last year he has been also working with the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) on their assessment of Teaching Quality in Higher Education. In this capacity he has acted as a Specialist Assessor in Mechanical Engineering and a Reporting Assessor.