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Quantifying Quality: the importance of student feedback

JANET LECKEY¹ & NEVILLE NEILL²

¹Education Development Unit, University of Ulster, Newtownabbey, County Antrim BT37 0QB, Northern Ireland, ²School of Computing and Mathematical Science, University of Ulster, Jordanstown BT37 0QB, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT *Higher education institutions throughout the United Kingdom are now scrutinised by assessors from the Quality Assurance Agency. The Agency's mission is to promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced. This paper focuses initially on the subject review results and reports for the mathematics, statistics and operational research aspect of provision. Of the six areas that are graded, the one which consistently produces the poorest results is quality management and enhancement. The most common reasons why institutions lose marks in this category are identified and the second biggest area of weakness, namely, seeking and implementing student views, is examined in the context of a survey carried out by the Educational Development Unit at the University of Ulster. It is evident that student evaluation, whether of courses, teaching quality or the overall student experience, is extremely important and has a significant role to play in the quality assurance process. Finally, recent initiatives are reported that attempt to raise the profile of teaching and learning and reward staff committed to excellence in teaching.*

Introduction

Many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom have undergone, or are in the process of undergoing, subject reviews by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for higher education [1]. Such reviews are designed to evaluate the quality of educational provision within a subject area and focus on the student learning experience and student achievement. Taught programmes of study at all levels are included since the terms of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 specify that funding councils have a statutory responsibility to ensure that all higher education for which funding is provided is of satisfactory quality.

Since the mid-1980s the global emphasis on quality, in all aspects of higher education, has led to it becoming the vehicle through which accountability is addressed (Horsburgh, 1998). External quality assurance which utilises peer-group visiting teams (Jacobs, 1998) has become the norm for quality assurance in higher education from Spain to South Africa and beyond.

Subject Review

Within the remit of the Quality Assurance Agency the purposes of subject review can be summarised as:

- to secure value from public investments;

- to encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of subject review reports and subject overview reports and through the sharing of best practice;
- to provide effective and accessible public information on the quality of higher education.

The main features of the subject review method are:

- peer review;
- self-assessment;
- review visit;
- graded profile;
- overall summative judgement;
- subject review report.

The UK higher education system has always prided itself on the quality of education it provides for its students. For the first time perhaps, quantifiable proof of the veracity of this claim is now available.

This paper focuses initially on the subject review results and reports for the mathematics, statistics and operational research (MSOR) aspect of provision at institutions throughout the UK. The reasons for this are quite simple. There is a substantial, well-documented set of results readily available and the second author of this paper has recently been through a subject review in this area. It must be noted that the QAA does issue a 'health warning', which is that caution should be exercised in making comparisons of subject providers solely on the basis of subject review outcomes. However, the findings of the research discussed in this paper relate to generic quality issues that have been identified by the assessors.

At the time of writing, 55 centres have been assessed under the MSOR remit (Table 1).

Only 17 out of the 55 centres gained a maximum score of 4 in quality management and enhancement (QME), that is, 69% did not completely satisfy the assessors in this area. This has consistently proven to be the weakest aspect of the six areas under consideration.

Final reports are not yet published for all the reviews, but the 28 that are available were analysed to see if:

- there were common areas of weakness in QME in those institutions that failed to gain a maximum mark;
- models of good practice were identified by the assessors in those colleges that had obtained a maximum mark in QME.

Findings

Of the 20 reports on those institutions scoring 2 or 3 in QME the most common reasons for losing marks include informality of process and the ways student views were sought (Table 2).

Not surprisingly, those institutions that gained a maximum score in QME had addressed these issues and the reports reflect this. Typical comments for all eight colleges in this category were:

- regular reviews of the provision undertaken;
- students views sought, acted upon and outcomes reported publicly;
- effective staff appraisal informing the staff development policy;

TABLE 1. MSOR aspect scores

	CDCO	TLA	SPA	SSG	LR	QME	Total
Aston	4	2	4	3	3	3	19
Bath	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
Birkbeck, London	4	3	4	4	4	2	21
Birmingham	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
Bolton Institute	2	3	3	4	4	4	20
Brighton	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Bristol	3	4	4	4	4	4	23
Cambridge	4	4	4	4	4	3	23
Canterbury, Christchurch	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
Central Lancs	3	3	3	4	3	3	19
City	4	4	3	4	4	4	23
Coventry	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
De Montfort	3	3	3	4	4	3	20
Durham	3	3	4	4	4	3	21
East Anglia	4	4	4	4	4	3	23
Essex	3	3	3	4	4	3	20
Exeter	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
Goldsmiths, London	3	4	3	3	4	4	21
Greenwich	3	3	3	4	4	2	19
Hertfordshire	4	3	3	4	4	3	21
Hull	3	3	4	4	4	4	22
Imperial, London	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Keele	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
Kent at Canterbury	4	3	4	3	4	3	21
Kings, London	3	3	3	4	4	4	21
Kingston	4	4	3	4	4	4	23
Lancaster	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Leeds	3	3	4	4	4	4	22
Leicester	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Liverpool	4	4	4	4	4	3	23
Liverpool John Moores	4	3	3	3	4	4	21
London School of Economics	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Manchester	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
Middlesex	3	4	3	4	4	2	20
Newcastle upon Tyne	4	4	4	4	4	3	23
Northumbria at Newcastle	4	3	4	3	4	3	21
Nottingham	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Nottingham Trent	3	3	3	4	4	4	21
Oxford	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Oxford Brookes	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
Plymouth	3	4	3	4	3	3	20
Portsmouth	3	3	4	4	4	4	22
Queen Mary & Westfield, London	4	3	3	4	4	3	21
Queen's University, Belfast	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
Reading	3	3	4	4	4	4	22
Sheffield	4	3	4	3	4	3	21
Sheffield Hallam	4	4	4	4	4	3	23
Southampton	3	3	3	4	4	3	20
Surrey	3	3	4	4	4	3	21
Sussex	4	3	4	4	4	4	23
Ulster	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
UMIST	4	3	4	4	4	3	22
West of England, Bristol	4	3	3	4	4	3	21
Wolverhampton	3	3	4	4	4	2	20
York	3	4	4	4	4	3	22
Aspects gaining a maximum score of 4	29	20	38	49	52	17	55

CDCO: curriculum design, content and organisation; TLA: teaching, learning and assessment; SPA: student progression and achievement; SSG: student support and guidance; LR: learning resources; QME: quality management and enhancement.

Collated by Richard Chambers, University of Sussex, <http://www.maths.susx.ac.uk/QAA/Reviews.html>

TABLE 2. Reasons for losing marks in QME

A. Informality in quality processes (12 universities): examples

Coursework and exam marking too informal	Lack of formality in operating peer observation schemes
Only informal links to external bodies	No formal staff appraisal policy
No formal means of identifying staff development needs	No formal induction and mentoring of new staff
Systematic review and monitoring of quality issues too informal	No formal way of sharing good practice
No formal internal moderation of coursework	Committee business too informally operated
No formal mechanism to ensure issues arising from student views are tackled	Formal recording of coursework missing
Students views sought only informally	No formal feedback to external examiners

B. Students and their opinions (eight universities): examples

Almost all the comments related to the means by which student views were sought (questionnaires, staff student consultative committees, etc.) and the action taken to address their concerns

C. Other areas: examples

Not disseminating good practice	Exam marking not well defined
Lack of reflection in the quality of provision	Postgraduate training not available
External examiner's comments not acted upon	Poor uptake of staff development courses in teaching and learning

- formal peer observation and/or peer review schemes in place and working effectively;
- new and part-time staff inducted, trained and mentored.

Whilst the majority of criticism centres upon lack of formality, it is assumed that the issues identified above will be addressed by the individual institutions. The draft report for Ulster also cites a lack of formality in the quality assurance procedures at faculty and university level and, in common with all UK higher education establishments, Ulster has in place rigorous procedures to ensure the quality of its courses is maintained and enhanced. Subject review reports are considered in the context of these procedures and full account is taken of any suggestions for improvement. It is reasonable to conclude therefore that the formalisation of quality issues will be a priority for all relevant institutions.

Accessing and Implementing Student Feedback

This paper now looks in some detail at the second biggest area of weakness, namely, seeking and implementing student views. The instruments used nationally to inform this important area of quality are many and varied and the Educational Development Unit (EDU) at the University of Ulster recently undertook an institutional review of its activities concerned with, and approaches to, student feedback. The review focused on current mechanisms in place with particular reference to the use of student questionnaires at both local (that is, faculty, school, course, module) and institutional (for example, graduate surveys) levels. As part of this review the EDU wrote to 156 higher education institutions

across the United Kingdom in an attempt to identify their practice in this area. Responses were received from 55 (35%) of the higher education institutions approached. The types of feedback mechanisms in use are:

- unit/module evaluation questionnaires (the most commonly used);
- course/programme evaluation questionnaires;
- student assessment of course and teaching questionnaires;
- teaching performance questionnaires;
- 'stage' questionnaires (which seek student body opinion on the year just completed);
- graduate/leaver questionnaires of student satisfaction with all aspects of student experience.

In the context of this paper 24 of the 55 institutions which had undergone the QAA Subject Review of MSOR were included in the responses received.

When the responses were analysed it became apparent that quite separate philosophies regarding student input existed within the higher education sector. Indeed it was difficult to define what constituted best practice, as there was no consistent pattern of student feedback mechanisms. A small number of universities did not invite undergraduate opinions at all, relying only on the views of recent graduates. Several institutions used a standard questionnaire for both assessment of teaching and student satisfaction but most have adopted a more flexible approach. The majority of higher education institutions have now devolved their feedback strategy to school or departmental level, thus allowing specific questionnaires such as module evaluation questionnaires to be constructed and distributed. Many use a wide range of methods to gather student comments including structured interviews, post-course debriefings, focus groups and student–staff consultative committees. The frequency of distribution of questionnaires also varied enormously with some institutions administering questionnaires annually, some biennially and some triennially. A summary of the instruments used and the levels at which they were implemented are given in Table 3.

The survey results were further analysed to see if national consistencies could be identified. Of the five Welsh colleges, three did not use a centralised evaluation strategy and two did. In the former group, departments, course teams and module leaders were encouraged to develop individual feedback processes and pro-formas. In Scotland the five respondents showed a more cohesive approach with most employing a standard evaluation questionnaire although some allowed for course-specific comments to be included. Furthermore, some recommended that additional student feedback be sought either annually or twice per term. In Northern Ireland, even though there are only two universities (excluding the Open University), each has adopted a quite different feedback policy. One has specifically stated that teaching and module evaluation guidelines must be devised at school or departmental level thus completely rejecting a standard university-wide format. The other university, however, uses a common assessment of teaching questionnaire across all modules with a corresponding general module evaluation scheme being piloted currently.

Quality Provision and Student Views

Student questionnaires are only one source of student feedback, but it is the source on which we have chosen to focus. Filling in 'satisfaction' questionnaires about teaching performance, the course/module effectiveness and overall student experience is now a common practice throughout higher education. This practice has been driven by factors

TABLE 3. Institutional administration of questionnaires

Number of institutions administering at local level (i.e. faculty, school, course) (L)	Number of institutions administering at institution-wide level (I)	Number of institutions administering at a combination of both (L) + (I)	Not applicable
<p><i>N</i> = 25 46%</p> <p>Questionnaires designed, administered and analysed at local level included, for example, 'tailored' module and course evaluation questionnaires and teaching performance questionnaires. Often responsibility was devolved to allow greater flexibility</p>	<p><i>N</i> = 15 27%</p> <p>Questionnaires designed, administered and analysed centrally included, for example, student satisfaction questionnaires for graduate students, research students, part-time students, etc. In some instances standardised module evaluation questionnaires were also in use.</p>	<p><i>N</i> = 14 25%</p> <p>In these institutions institution-wide and local-based questionnaires are administered. For example, one institution had a centralised standard student assessment of teaching questionnaire because of the belief that the institution should have a formal centrally administered process for assessing the quality of teaching. Responsibility for student assessment of courses was devolved to departments to suit the needs of various disciplines.</p>	<p><i>N</i> = 1 2%</p> <p>This institution did not operate a modular system and did not use questionnaires to collect student feedback.</p>

such as the introduction of the Teaching and Higher Education Act (1998) which confirmed the end of free tuition for many undergraduates commencing degree courses in the 1998–1999 academic year; and the reduction, and eventual abolition, of the maintenance grant in the 1999–2000 academic year. Another contributory factor has been the pressure from the quality movement. Increasingly student feedback is seen as having a major role in delivering quality in higher education.

According to Winter-Hebron (1984), the most favoured method of obtaining student opinion about their course is the questionnaire. It is also found to be the most common form of evaluation technique employed and recommended by lecturers (Rutherford, 1987).

Ellis *et al.* (1993) stated that, in its simplest form, quality in university teaching would be that which satisfies the primary consumer, the student. Two approaches to quality assurance for university teaching were identified as being most widespread. The first was the planning, validation and review of courses, while the second was the use of feedback from students on the perceived quality of teaching. This latter approach, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s was systematic and widespread and almost universal in North American universities, was still relatively novel in the UK. In fact, the last two decades of

the 20th century have been witness to the study of students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness as one of the most frequently emphasised areas in North American educational research. Literally thousands of papers have been written and numerous authors have undertaken comprehensive reviews of these. Marsh and Dunkin (1997) noted that the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database 'contains over 1300 entries under the heading student evaluations of teaching performance'. They suggest that the bulk of the research undertaken in this area supported the continuing use of students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness as well as advocating further scrutiny of the process.

Although quality assurance is broader than students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness, the collection of this information is important for several reasons:

- it can be used as diagnostic feedback to academic staff to assist them in the enhancement of the quality of their teaching performance;
- it can provide a measure of teaching effectiveness for use in administrative decision-making;
- it can inform students and assist their decision-making when selecting a course of study;
- it can be used to inform research on teaching.

Rowley (1995) identified the central role of student feedback in quality assurance processes and argued that insufficient attention had been directed towards improving the data collection instruments and processes associated with student feedback in the higher education setting. Many questionnaires were poorly designed and lack of standardisation of questionnaire design throughout an institution militated against the consistency of data collected. Rowley believed that:

... gathering relevant, representative and useful student opinion is a necessary part of the quality assurance process. (1995, p. 19)

The significance of student feedback in the process makes it imperative that it is gathered effectively and efficiently.

However, Harvey (1999) suggests that too often questionnaires are based on what managers or teachers think are important to students. He believes that:

- students must be able to raise issues that are important to them;
- there must be an assessment of what is important as well as satisfactory;
- there must be an explicit action cycle with clear structures for delegating responsibility for change and for providing feedback on action to students.

Whilst Harvey illustrates the action cycle as practised in the University of Central England (Harvey *et al.*, 1997), he suggests that the whole action cycle is rare. In many instances, institutions collect student feedback but do not always deal with it appropriately. It may not be properly analysed, or it may be analysed but 'becomes lost' in reports with statistics and tables that give little guidance for action and have limited circulation. Furthermore, often the 'feedback loop' is not closed in that students may not be informed about any actions resulting from their input. Closing the loop is an important issue in terms of total quality management. If students do not see any action resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate.

This view is underlined by Powney (1998) in a report *Closing the Loop: The impact of student feedback on students' subsequent learning*. Powney analysed two typical institutions' feedback mechanisms in her research and observed that whilst an immense amount of effort and resources were currently put into student feedback, the approaches adopted by

universities too often meant that there was a lack of coordination leading to omissions, overlaps and repetitions between different departments. Furthermore, she found that there can be a degree of cynicism among students as they rarely get any information about the consequences of feedback and this, in turn, can contribute to the difficulty of getting students to engage in the process of quality assurance. The loop is thus seldom closed.

Student Feedback: the staff perspective

Much of the emphasis on seeking and implementing feedback is on the instruments used, mode of collection and resulting effect on the overall student experience. While these aspects are extremely important, much less literature exists on the attitudes of staff to the entire process. It would be fair to say that many are sceptical about student evaluations for a number of reasons:

- students are not trained assessors, yet their responses often cannot be challenged even if they are clearly contrary to the lecturer's own experience;
- if the feedback system is imposed upon staff by the college hierarchy, then no sense of ownership exists and enthusiastic participation is minimised;
- poor performance as reported by student questionnaires generally leads to action by line managers, whereas good or excellent results are rarely commented upon or taken into account when seeking career advancement.

A typical summary of the approach to feedback is as follows:

We did not want the results of the quality process used as a stick to beat people, but as a mechanism to improve the course. It would not become a significant part of the lecturer's appraisal, but at the same time it was agreed that there would be no point in carrying out such a review unless the lecturers were going to reflect upon the results and take action to remedy shortcomings. The results of the actions taken would be noticed when the next quality review took place in a year's time. If there were no noticeable improvement in the students' rating then it would be valid for the departmental management to make enquiries of the lecturer concerned. (Richardson, 1998, p. 214)

Getting *all* staff in *all* departments in *all* universities to engage fully with a feedback system will never happen, but many can be persuaded of its worth. For experienced lecturers the catalyst has often been an impending Subject Review visit and the consequent direct involvement of senior staff both at faculty and university level. Newer members of the teaching teams, however, tend to accept feedback as a normal and indeed crucial part of becoming a reflective practitioner. Having put the appropriate mechanisms in place it is then relatively simple to monitor compliance through annual review procedures and perhaps biannual appraisals.

Current and Proposed Practice at the University of Ulster

Closing the loop prompted us to reflect on what procedures will be in place in the University of Ulster from the commencement of the academic year 2000–2001. At present two questionnaires are in use.

Assessment of Teaching Questionnaire

This questionnaire is intended to be used as part of the university's quality assurance procedure to improve the quality of teaching in the university. Students are asked to comment upon the teaching performance of an individual lecturer and all teaching activities carried out by that lecturer within a particular module. The questionnaire, comprising 18 questions, is designed to provide student feedback with respect to:

- structure and organisation of teaching;
- characteristics of the member of teaching staff;
- subject knowledge and references;
- student participation;
- care and concern for students;
- presentation skills;
- assignment/project setting;
- overall assessment of teaching received.

This information, confidential to the Head of School and individual lecturer, is used to assist a lecturer to reflect on their teaching and any continuing professional development needs.

Graduate Questionnaire

The graduate questionnaire, sent to all potential graduates on completion of their final examinations, attempts to ascertain student satisfaction with their overall experience whilst studying at the university. It contains 50 questions and a free response final page. Areas of interest include:

- employment;
- support services (careers, counselling and guidance, health, accommodation, etc.);
- educational services (library, computer services);
- course organisation and assessment;
- teaching methods;
- self-development.

The findings, presented in an overall institutional report, are further distilled and presented in reports dedicated to individual faculties and services. Responses to the findings are sought and both findings and responses are reported to senior management across the university.

In addition to these, the university is introducing a generic module evaluation questionnaire that comprises 31 questions and is designed to provide student feedback on a number of aspects relating to a module. These are:

- module information;
- module content;
- delivery of module content;
- educational resources and support;
- assessment procedures;
- timing and adequacy of student feedback.

The data collected will be used in order to support the ongoing development and future enhancement of the module.

TABLE 4. Student concerns and faculty responses

Problem	Solution
Access to computing facilities	Open a sixth PC laboratory available 24 hours/day, 7 days/week. Limit access to most faculty resources to informatics students only until 7pm each evening.
Lack of printing facilities	Create a dedicated printing laboratory with four card-operated laser printers linked to 10 PCs.
Staff availability	Each member of staff now has a timetable outside their door showing a minimum of four hours/week when they can be contacted without appointment. Email addresses are included to facilitate electronic access.
Inadequate library resources	Funds made available for the purchase of multiple copies of key texts.
Bunching of assignments	Coursework schedules collated by course directors and circulated to all year groups. These include both submission and return dates.
Lack of accountability in coursework submission	A cover sheet has been developed which students now attach to their assignment. It has a detachable section, which is stamped by the school office and provides proof of submission.

Feedback: action and inaction

Rowley (1995) believes that questionnaires suffer from some inherent limitations, the most significant of which is that they tend to be retrospective and summative because they are usually completed towards or at the end of a unit, module or course. Thus, whilst the findings may result in the enhancement of a particular course of study, or improvement in teaching performance, the students from whom feedback has been obtained are not normally the beneficiaries of any subsequent improvements. Viewing current practice in the University of Ulster in the context of Rowley's analysis, it is clear that this conclusion is only partially correct. The graduate survey findings can only influence the educational experiences of subsequent undergraduates but students completing module questionnaires can, and indeed should, expect to see their views considered quickly.

In the past few years the graduate survey has consistently thrown up three main areas of student frustration within the Faculty of Informatics, namely, access to computers, lack of printing facilities and staff availability. The module questionnaires often reiterated these but also raised issues such as inadequate library provision to support module content, bunching of assignments and lack of accountability when submitting coursework. The Faculty of Informatics responded to these criticisms (Table 4).

The recent QAA visit provided a unique opportunity to measure the effectiveness or otherwise of these changes. As part of their schedule the QAA assessors met student focus groups drawn from each year of the taught programmes under review. When questioned, the final-year students, in particular, could honestly report on how their opinions had been sought and acted upon. During their time at Ulster, they had witnessed considerable improvements in those areas they had identified as being weak and hence felt that they had had a significant input into the entire educational experience offered by the faculty. Students from other years in the courses, who had therefore benefited directly from the feedback process, echoed these sentiments.

Failing to act on student feedback is often mentioned when the MSOR reports from other

institutions are examined. It is evident that subject review assessors accept that the gathering of student opinion is a necessary part of the quality assurance procedure and how an institution uses this feedback is critical when assessors determine the QME grade to be awarded. For example, although one institution operated a university-wide student satisfaction questionnaire and a module evaluation questionnaire, the reviewers stated, 'Students expressed their views to the reviewers robustly, and reported that in some instances there was a slow response to their comments'. In another, where students' views are sought in a university-wide perception questionnaire, students commented on the absence of feedback from the module questionnaires. This lack of dissemination of outcomes contributed to the reviewers' belief that there was an over-reliance on informality in the application of systems in the particular school. They suggested that by addressing this over-reliance on informal processes the quality of education could be improved.

In one institution, awarded a grade 2 in QME, the reviewers commented that 'the collection and processing of student opinion by questionnaires is not effective'. In another instance the reviewers questioned the relevance and representativeness of the data gathered, specifically the use of questionnaires at course level which did not address generic university questions and which had wide variability in response rates.

The importance of closing the loop was apparent from comments made about two institutions, each awarded grade 4 in the QME aspect:

The gathering and evaluation of student opinion through module questionnaires is thorough and leads to effective action. Staff take student views very seriously.

Each module is evaluated by student questionnaires and there was considerable evidence that the information derived is analysed on a regular basis and appropriate action taken.

The conclusion that can be drawn from both our own experiences at Ulster and the reports analysed to date is that student evaluation, whether of courses, teaching quality or their overall experience, is extremely important. If addressed properly, it is a formal acknowledgement by an institution that it respects student views when taking account of both setting and monitoring standards. It has also become evident however that feedback is of little use, indeed it is of negative value, if it is not addressed appropriately.

Changing the Culture

Improving the quality of teaching and learning is now a high priority for most UK universities as evidenced by recent publications such as the Higher Education Quality Council document *Learning from Audit* (1994). To improve quality naturally prompts the initial question: 'what is good teaching and learning?' Not surprisingly, this is difficult to specify exactly. The aims of higher education are summed up by Bourner (1997) as:

- disseminating up-to-date knowledge;
- developing the capacity to use ideas and information;
- developing the student's ability to test ideas and evidence;
- facilitating the personal development of students;
- developing the capacity of students to plan and manage their own learning.

Academics who strive for excellence in these areas are now being recognised in a number of ways. The University of Ulster, as with many third-level institutions, now has a rolling strategy for learning and teaching. Its aim is the establishment of central and faculty

structures that will encourage an innovative and reflective approach to learning and teaching among all staff in order to enhance the quality of the learning experiences of the student.

Each faculty now has a coordinator for student learning and staff are encouraged to be innovative in their teaching, learning and assessment strategies and they will be provided with opportunities for professional development. Reflective practice in learning and teaching is encouraged by regular module evaluation to inform the annual course review and by participation in the university's peer observation of teaching scheme.

To reward those who strive to improve their teaching the position of the faculty regarding advancement is quite clear:

The faculty will continue its policy of supporting staff for promotion to senior lecturer, reader and professor on the basis of their contribution to, and excellence in, teaching. The faculty promotes the university's 'distinguished teaching awards' to its students and has several recipients among its staff.

At a national level the newly created Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) [2], which recently welcomed its 2000th member, exemplifies this commitment to recognising and rewarding excellence in learning and teaching. The ILT aims to enhance the status of teaching and is the only organisation of its kind in the UK. It is a professional body for all who teach and support learning in higher education. One of the five areas of professional activity for which prospective members must provide evidence is *reflective practice and development*.

Another initiative designed to raise awareness of teaching standards is the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) [3]. This consists of 20 fellowships each worth £50,000, which provide a high profile means of recognising and rewarding excellent teaching and learning support. One fellowship has been awarded to a lecturer at the University of Ulster. Two of the key considerations listed by the NTFS as being present in an excellent teacher are:

- making use of student feedback to influence the development of practice;
- being reflective about personal teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Finally, the UK higher education funding bodies have established a new Learning and Teaching Support Network [4] to promote high quality learning and teaching in all subject disciplines. It aims to collect and disseminate examples of good practice (for example, those identified in subject reviews) and support institutions in delivering their learning and teaching strategies.

In summary, the influence of student feedback within a learning and teaching strategy is increasingly important and those institutions that have embraced it effectively have been praised in the current subject review process.

Good learning and teaching is now recognised internationally, nationally and by individual universities as being crucial to the entire educational experience at higher level. In recognition of this, practitioners can now compete with their research-oriented colleagues in terms of promotion and advancement.

Conclusion

The quality of education provided by UK HEIs is being scrutinised more closely than ever before. The Quality Assurance Agency subject reviews in the field of mathematics, statistics and operational research have identified two main areas of weakness; lack of

formality in the management of quality issues and a failure to seek, analyse and address student opinion consistently.

This paper has focused on the latter aspect and has attempted to analyse current approaches adopted by British universities. The range of methodologies employed shows how no consistent policy has yet evolved and highlights the different philosophies followed by individual institutions. When the subject review reports were analysed, however, it became apparent that the way in which feedback is collected is relatively unimportant. What is important is what is done with this student input, namely:

- what action is taken;
- how the outcomes are conveyed to the students themselves.

Interestingly, only one or two respondents stated explicitly how their findings would be communicated to the student body.

Whilst the use of institution-wide questionnaires analysed centrally and leading to annual student satisfaction surveys is considered admirable in principle, low completion rates can devalue the usefulness of such surveys. At the University of Ulster the response rate to the graduate questionnaire has tended to decline over the last few years, falling from a response rate of 44% in 1997 to 39% in 1999. This is a problem shared by other higher education institutions and the trend may be attributed to the widespread introduction over recent years of a number of appraisal and evaluation questionnaires, a consequence of which is student fatigue and disinterest.

Rowley (1995) concluded her article 'Student feedback: a shaky foundation for quality assurance' as follows:

The significance of student feedback in the quality assurance process makes it imperative that it be gathered effectively and efficiently. (Rowley, 1995, p. 20)

Five years on the results to date in the subject reviews of mathematics, statistics and operational research would suggest that effective use of student feedback is still lacking. However, staff who do endeavour to become reflective practitioners now can be both recognised and rewarded for their commitment to excellence.

Notes

[1] <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>

[2] <http://www.ilt.ac.uk/>

[3] <http://ntfs.ilt.ac.uk/>

[4] <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/>

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