

## Keynote Lecture\*

# Subject Review—What are We Trying to Achieve?

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In the early 1990s, the Higher Education Councils were charged with assessing the quality of provision in higher education. The process of Teaching Quality Assessment was used in Wales and Scotland, followed by Subject Review, organised by the Quality Assurance Agency, in England and Northern Ireland. This provided stakeholders in higher education with access to objective information on quality of provision. Key aspects of quality assurance in education are fitness for purpose and team-working, to provide coherent and appropriate provisions. The system has been criticised on the grounds that it is unnecessary and wasteful of time and resources. However, it has acted as a major awareness-raising exercise in the higher education sector. Ultimately, it is about how well we care for our students. All the Schools of Pharmacy, who have long been subject to professional body accreditation, scored highly at TQA/Subject Review.

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) process of quality review has recently been under review. It is almost certain that the processes of Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) and Subject Review (SR) will be replaced by a system that depends more upon internal institutional reviews. QAA reviews will concentrate on assessing institutional systems of quality, with the possibility of reviews of particular subject provisions where appropriate. It is likely that most Pharmacy schools will escape such so-called “drilling down” as a result

of high performance in the recently completed round of subject reviews (England and Northern Ireland) and teaching quality assessment (Wales and Scotland). Thus, the title of this article might be more accurate as “what *were* we trying to achieve?” The answer is that Section 70 of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act charged the Higher Education Funding Councils with

- (1) securing value from public investment by
  - (a) ensuring that all education for which HEFC provides funding is of approved quality, and by encouraging speedy rectification of major shortcomings in the quality of education, and
  - (b) by using subject review to inform funding,
- (2) encouraging improvements in the quality of education through the publication of subject review reports and subject overview reports, and through the sharing of best practice,
- (3) providing, through the publication of reports, effective and accessible public information on the quality of higher education.

This begs the question “for whom”? It was reasoned that stakeholders in higher education, e.g. students (the consumers), parents (the customers), employers (the end users) and government (the funders) should have access to objective information on quality of provision throughout the sector to aid choice and decision-making.

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One of the greatest difficulties is in defining Quality in educational terms. One compelling definition comes from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales who propose that quality includes "the achievement of students in a well-organised and challenging curriculum in a supportive learning environment with appropriate assessment and feedback". The key is fitness for purpose. Thus, a student attending a polytechnic or college recently promoted to university status should have the expectation of receiving a similar quality of provision (as defined above) to a student attending a long-established, prestigious university (or *vice versa!*), even though the different establishments will have different intakes, goals and purposes.

As well as fitness for purpose, another key element is team work. University teachers, like professional footballers, are strong individualists and often their career progression will have been determined by their independence, for example, as researchers. Football teams made up highly individual *prima donnas* are rarely successful if the players do not pass the ball to each other. Likewise, university programmes are most appreciated by students when they have a coherence built upon strong team work by the delivery team. Thus, a quality programme is generally perceived as one that has been well "bolted together".

There is no denying that the system has had problems in terms of costs, both direct, and, in relation to institutions' preparation time, indirect. In the early days of TQA there was initially a lack of understanding, and a distrust of, the process. This was quickly overtaken by a more strategic, formulaic approach to submissions leading to worries that sound but bland provisions were scoring more highly than slightly weaker but innovative provisions. There were also tensions, particularly in a small subject area like pharmacy, where

most academics know each other, as a result of the face-to-face assessment system. The strength of the QAA system was that, despite its flaws, it produced assessments that were based on a set of common guidelines for every programme, and that were taken by assessors who had been trained, and who were led by independent review chairs. It, thus, avoided elitist-type subjective assessments. The outcomes may not have been to everyone's liking but they were as fair as they could possibly be.

The central question is: "did the Subject Review process achieve anything"? This author believes that the process acted mainly as significant awareness-raising exercise; simply reading the QAA guidelines for subject review should have been thought-provoking enough to alert departments to any potential shortcomings in their provision. This, coupled with greater advancement prospects for staff with proven excellent teaching skills, has raised the standing of teaching and learning in relation to the high standing of research. It is of particular interest that the Schools of Pharmacy, who have long been used to another type of quality assessment in the form of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain's degree accreditation process, all scored very highly at Subject Review or TQA. The major difference between accreditation and subject review/TQA is that the latter has been a graded assessment, while the accreditation process is judging if provisions reach a particular level, or not. Additionally, in terms of the processes involved, a major concern for the RPSGB is the resources available for teaching pharmacy students, particularly staff; the QAA system paid less attention to this aspect.

Ultimately, the issue of quality in higher education is about the experience for our students. Most of our income is derived from teaching students. If we care about our students, then we should welcome the system's interest in how well we care for them.