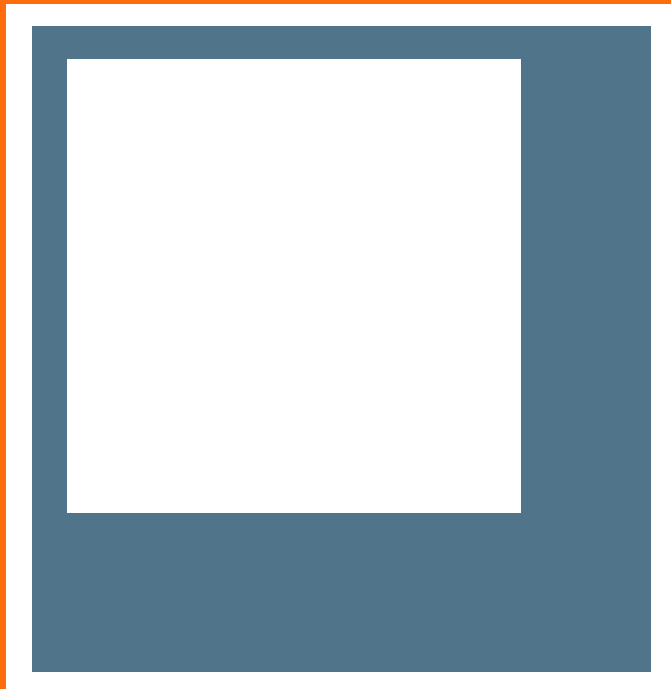


Driving improvements through research

A summary of QAA's research activity and findings



Foreword

Welcome to the first in a new series of *Driving Improvements through Research*, in which we report on research commissioned or conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Our mission at QAA is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education. We are the UK's expert body on quality and standards in higher education. A key element of our role is to provide a solid evidence base for policy and to inform good practice. We want to make sure that higher education bodies, policy makers and the public can draw on timely, high quality and relevant research.

Increasingly we conduct and commission original evidence-based research, to help drive improvement and ensure the best possible experience for students. We publish this analysis on our website and publicise it widely to those with an interest in UK higher education.

This report summarises the research we have recently undertaken and commissioned. These projects responded to a need and demand within the higher education community. Some were led by UK university research teams; others were collaborative or conducted in-house at QAA. The report also highlights some of our research plans for the coming year.

By making relevant, up to date research available, we contribute to the body of knowledge that shapes policy and practice in UK higher education, and support the continued excellence of UK higher education.

We intend this to be a regular series, providing updates on our work in the area of higher education research. Please do get in touch if you would like to discuss opportunities for collaboration, or if you would like more detail about any aspect of the work of QAA.



Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive

Commissioned research projects

In 2012-13 QAA funded several research projects. Three of these looked at the student experience, investigating what students expect from their higher education, how they perceive it, and how they participate in quality management. The other two projects looked at how further education colleges develop a higher education ethos, and at how external examiners understand and use the concept of 'academic standards'.

Student expectations and perceptions of higher education

This project, fully funded by QAA, was carried out by King's College London and led by Dr Camille Kandiko. It aimed to explore the views of students entering higher education in the UK in 2012-13, and to investigate their perceptions and expectations about the quality of their learning experience and the academic standards of their chosen programmes of study. The report will be disseminated by QAA and by King's College London at a range of events.

Findings

The final report was published on 18 November 2013 and launched at a policy forum event in London. The research found that students want:

- 'value for money', which they interpret in terms of contact hours, resources, and investment in teaching and learning spaces
- the opportunity to build their employability through extracurricular activities, internships and work placements
- access to teaching staff who are knowledgeable and well qualified and trained, with a preference for small-group settings.

Student engagement in learning and teaching quality management

This multi-method qualitative research project, fully funded by QAA, was carried out by the University of Bath and led by Professor Gwen van der Velden. The project evaluated the extent to which the Expectation and the Indicators of sound practice in *Chapter B5: Student engagement* of the Quality Code reflect the current status of student engagement activities of higher education providers in the UK.

Findings

The final report was published by the University of Bath and featured at the policy forum event in London in November 2013. It will be disseminated by QAA and the University of Bath at a range of events. The research found that:

- there is wide variation in the approaches institutions take to student engagement, and many approaches are highly innovative and effective
- there tends to be more developed student representation at higher levels in institutions than at school or faculty level
- institutions tend to see students as stakeholders or partners, rather than as consumers
- students' unions offer a valuable and credible independent voice for students.

Capturing a higher education ethos in college higher education

This QAA-funded report on practice in further education colleges was produced by John Lea (Canterbury Christchurch University) and Jonathan Simmons (University of the West of England). It explores the context in which further education colleges in England have been responding to the opportunities and challenges of providing higher education programmes. Specifically, it explores the connection between two features that have been identified as crucial in ensuring that such programmes can provide an enriching learning experience for higher education students.

Firstly, the experience needs to be demonstrably 'higher' than that of further education, not just in terms of higher-level learning outcomes, but in relation to what has been termed a 'higher education ethos'. Secondly, the learning experience needs to be soundly underpinned by a culture of research and scholarship.

Findings

The study looked at six very different further education colleges, with numbers of higher education students ranging from 100 to 3,000. The report made several overall recommendations, relating to:

- making sure partnership and validation arrangements meet the needs of students
- promoting a higher education ethos at colleges with smaller-scale provision
- investigating academic and vocational 'drift'
- the research environment that provides a context for taught courses.

The findings of this study have informed presentations at Association of Colleges events and featured at a QAA event for college higher education in London in October 2013.

External examiners' understanding and use of academic standards

This research project was jointly commissioned by QAA and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and was undertaken by Oxford Brookes University and the University of Cumbria. Its purpose was to illustrate to the UK higher education sector how external examiners understand academic standards and how they use that understanding to give advice and recommendations to higher education providers.

Findings

The research emphasises the importance of a shared understanding (between internal and external examiners) of the standards applicable to programmes and the qualifications to which they lead. It shows the value of communication between examiners to promote this understanding within a specific subject, and to ensure awareness of how achievement is reported within the subject and across the institution as a whole.

In addition, it highlights the importance of the guidance in *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code, and the HEA's *A handbook for external examining*.

Publications

The following publications commissioned during 2012-13 aim to provide useful information and stimulate debate. They are available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/publications.

Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2009-11: Series 3

Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2009-11: Assessment and feedback, published November 2012

Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2009-11: Postgraduate research students, published November 2012

Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2009-11: Student engagement, published October 2012

Talking about quality

Degree awarding powers

by Professor Chris Clare, Martin Lockett and Chris Maguire, published May 2013

Challenges in a changing sector

by Sir Tim Wilson, published September 2013

College higher education: the unasked questions

by Professor Gareth Parry, published October 2013

Guidance documents

In 2013, in the light of changes in UK higher education policy, matters such as contact hours and value for money were widely discussed in the public arena. It became apparent that there was a need for further guidance and public information to inform this debate. Following collaboration across the UK higher education sector and an initiative by the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group, QAA published two sets of guidance documents for higher education providers and students.

The following four documents are intended to assist institutions with providing information for students.

- *Explaining staff teaching qualifications*
- *Explaining class size*
- *Explaining student workload*
- *Responding to student feedback*

The following four complementary documents are intended for a student audience.

- *Information on staff teaching qualifications*
- *Information on class size*
- *Information on workload*
- *Information on how you can comment on your course*

Searchable resources

Knowledgebases and case studies

The Good Practice Knowledgebase and Recommendations Knowledgebase were launched in 2012-13 on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/improvinghighereducation. These easily searchable knowledgebases bring together the examples of good practice and recommendations set out in QAA review reports, and link these to relevant chapters of the Quality Code. Good practice case studies containing detailed qualitative information are also now available.

Empirical research database

QAA's Higher Education Empirical Research (HEER) database was launched in November 2012. It comprises summaries of the latest published research on a range of topics related to higher education. The database is intended for use by policy makers, academics and researchers in higher education. Subscription is free; for details go to <http://heer.qaa.ac.uk>.

Other research activities

What students think of their higher education

This research project analysed the student written submissions for reviews of higher education institutions undergoing Institutional Review (England and Northern Ireland) in this review method's first year of operation, 2011-12.

Findings

A thematic analysis has been produced, providing a current and authentic account of students' views. The most important considerations for students are:

- contact time with academic staff - many don't feel there is enough
- value for money - students tend to calculate this as 'fees paid divided by contact time', meaning there is a perceived inequity between courses
- the quality and timeliness of the feedback they get on their work
- the availability of reliable information about their course and assessments, including information about hidden costs (for example in relation to placements).

Revision of the Listed Bodies Order

QAA was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in December 2012 to revise the Listed Bodies Order, a statutory document issued by the UK government, listing all the bodies that have been acknowledged as higher education providers on behalf of UK degree-awarding bodies. The revised Order will be published on the BIS website.

Collaborative PhD studentship

A collaborative PhD studentship (funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council) has been awarded to Alex Griffiths by King's College, University of London, to investigate 'risk-based' quality assurance. Alex, who was appointed in September 2013, will be supervised by Professor Alison Wolf at King's College London, with Dr Elizabeth Halford, Head of Research, Information and Enquiry at QAA acting as mentor for the work-based component of the research, which will be hosted by QAA.

Research Advisory Group

Significant to establishing a research strategy at QAA was the creation of the Research Advisory Group, to inform and support activities, with membership drawn from eminent academics in the field of higher education research and senior managers at QAA. Profiles of the Research Advisory Group members are available on the QAA website.

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