

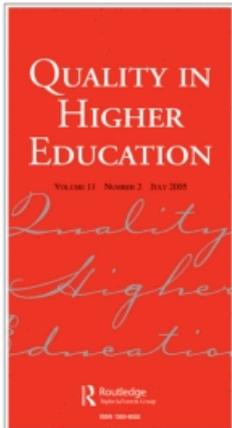
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Quality and the Scholarship of Teaching: learning from subject review

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines some of the ways in which subject review can contribute to the scholarship of teaching. Subject review was a quality assessment process conducted under the auspices of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. A preliminary discussion considers the potential and pitfalls of using subject review as a basis for learning about current academic practice. The analysis draws on 162 institutional reports, covering business and management provision and produced during the period 2000–1. The pedagogic principles that underpinned subject review judgements, such as flexibility, transparency and pedagogic pluralism, are identified. These suggest that, while 'fitness for purpose' was the explicit criterion for judging institutional standards, in practice, reviewers were guided by a series of implicit evaluative principles. To some extent, these principles may be linked to learning theory and the ongoing debate concerning the scholarship of teaching.*

Introduction

Between 1997 and 2001, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertook subject review of higher education in the UK. Given the time and energy that went into this process, it is pertinent to ask whether anything of value can be learnt from it. More specifically, can it be said to have generated anything that might contribute to the scholarship of teaching and academic practice more generally? While subject review was not overtly driven by considerations of scholarship, certain aspects of the process are of considerable relevance to the ongoing debate concerning the scholarship of teaching.

The phrase 'scholarship of teaching' is now used extensively and incorporates critical reflection on teaching, a willingness to share good or best practice based on pedagogic research and recognition of the interdependence between educational research and practice (Boyer, 1990; Nicholls, 2001). The underlying goal of the scholarship of teaching is to enhance the quality of the student learning experience through rigorous evaluation of practice (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Some of the values inherent in the scholarship of teaching can be said to resonate with those implicit in subject review. Two examples are the notion of communicating and disseminating material relating to the teaching and learning practices of one's subject

(Hutchings & Schulman, 1999) and 'making transparent how learning is made possible' (Trigwell, 2003). Both are evident in the contribution that subject review has made to the increased visibility of academic practice in higher education. Moreover, it can be argued that there is, or should be, a close relationship between the pursuit of enhanced quality in higher education and the adoption of a scholarly approach to educational practice. Although this is not necessarily made manifest, it is often implied.

Using subject overview and institutional reports, which are in the public domain, the subject review process will be examined to see how it can contribute to the scholarship of teaching. The analysis will also draw on some of the initial findings of a research project funded by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Subject Centre for Business, Management and Accountancy [1].

The Nature of Subject Review

The *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992 identified the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as having a statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of higher education. However, following its establishment in 1997, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was contracted by HEFCE to act on its behalf in this regard. Subject review was based on the principles of peer review and self-assessment. It also incorporated a form of criterion-referenced assessment, which took account of the recommendation of the Dearing Report (1997), that quality assurance should be more outcomes oriented.

Institutions, where a particular subject was taught at higher-education level, were subject to a three-day visit by a team of specialists, specially constituted for the purpose. In the case of business and management, this meant that, as well as institutions of higher education, provision in many further education colleges running courses funded by HEFCE was also reviewed. As a result no fewer than 162 institutions were visited. Such numbers reflect the fact that business and management has been one of the fastest growing subject areas and today it is the largest, accounting for approximately 12% of students on first degree courses (Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2001). The institutional subject review reports cover business, management and related subjects (for example, hospitality and tourism) and relate to reviews undertaken during the period 2000–1.

The role of the visiting team was to assess six aspects of provision within a framework of aims and objectives set by the institution under review. The aspects were:

1. curriculum design, content and organisation;
2. teaching, learning and assessment;
3. student progression and achievement;
4. student support and guidance;
5. learning resources;
6. quality management and enhancement.

For each aspect, review teams awarded the institution a grade on a scale of 1 to 4, with grade 1 signifying that aims and objectives had not been met; grade 2 that aims had been broadly met, but significant improvements could be made; grade 3 that aims were substantially met, but there was still scope for improvement, and grade 4 that the aims were met.

Underlying the awarding of grades, on the basis of aims and objectives set by the subject provider, was a 'fitness for purpose' definition of quality. By contrast with business organisations, which would normally seek out customer expectations to determine their

requirements, 'fitness for purpose' in a higher education context was interpreted as the extent to which an institution was able to fulfil its own mission or the aims and objectives of academic programmes of study (Harvey, 1995).

The outcome of each review was the institutional report. As well as indicating the grades awarded to the institution, the report included a commentary on the six aspects of provision. Amongst other things, the comments were intended to indicate the reasons why a particular grade had been awarded.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, subject review was controversial. It had its advocates and supporters but it also generated a considerable amount of criticism. There were three notable positive features of subject review. First, it sought to be wide-ranging in its coverage of subject areas, levels of course (from sub-degree to PhD), aspects of provision and institutions. Thus, it contributed to the pool of evaluative data on higher education in English and Northern Irish institutions, the two parts of the UK covered by subject review. Second, the use of the six-aspect framework helped to ensure an element of consistency in the way that provider institutions were reviewed and findings were reported. Third, there was an attempt to make the process as transparent as possible. This was achieved, in part, by the publication of a subject review handbook (QAA, 2000) containing the review criteria and procedures for determining grades. Subject review teams used the handbook to avoid accusations of 'hidden' criteria being deployed. In addition, institutional facilitators had full access to meetings of the review team during the visit; institutional and subject overview reports were subsequently published on the Internet; and the names of all reviewers were placed on a public register. Overall, subject review contributed to an increased awareness of the scale and nature of what was on offer in higher education.

However, subject review can be criticised on several counts. First, because they are in the public domain, the reports were written in a fairly bland style. Some evaluative language was used, with laudatory terms like 'excellent', 'commended', 'innovative' and 'good practice' appearing in a number of reports. However, on the whole, colourful or extreme language was eschewed. Moreover, in making critical comments, the language was generally guarded; overtly pejorative terms, such as 'poor', 'weak' and 'bad practice' are conspicuous by their absence.

Second, the grading system can be said to be misleading. While subject review was based on a 'fitness for purpose' definition of quality, the aggregation of grades awarded led many to interpret a maximum score of 24 (that is, 6 times 4) as indicating 'perfection'. However, as many of the reports illustrate, institutions with a top score could still have shortcomings. In these instances, subject reviewers did not deem them to be sufficiently serious to warrant dropping a grade. Institutions were awarded a grade 4 in each aspect unless evidence of poor practice came to light that was sufficiently serious to warrant the deduction of one or more grades. This contrasts markedly with a system where points have to be earned or accumulated.

Third, the making of comparisons on the basis of the grades and reports was discouraged by the QAA. The following statement appeared in every report:

Readers should be cautious in making comparisons of subject providers solely on the basis of subject review outcomes. Comparisons between providers with substantively different aims and objectives would have little validity.

This warning notwithstanding, many league tables of higher education institutions, often produced by national newspapers such as *The Sunday Times*, incorporated some element of the outcomes of subject review. Indeed, an aggregate score of 22 or more was widely equated with 'excellence', a category used in the previous teaching quality assessment

process. However, this is a purely arbitrary and largely bogus comparison of two differently configured approaches to quality assurance and was invented for the purpose of constructing league tables based on the principle of quality as 'excellence' as opposed to 'fitness for purpose'. Furthermore, such league tables failed to show how institutions recruiting students from more disadvantaged backgrounds had 'added value' to perhaps a greater extent than those educating students from more privileged sections of the community. In this respect it has been argued that the 'best' universities are really the ones that provide the greatest 'added value' (Brown, 2003).

Critics of subject review have also drawn attention to the excessively bureaucratic nature of the process; the endless paper chases to which it gave rise; the waste of staff time in preparation; and the negligible benefits of a successful outcome in terms of finance and publicity (Smith, 1999; *THES*, 2001).

It is also clear that there is continued confusion about the operation of different definitions and perceptions of 'quality'. HEFCE has a statutory obligation to ensure that higher education provision offers value from public resources invested in it. In other words, its remit accords with a 'value for money' definition of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). By contrast, as indicated earlier, implicit in subject review was a 'fitness for purpose' view of quality. Yet the outcomes from subject review have been widely interpreted as involving notions of 'excellence'. Thus, there are at least three different, and potentially conflicting, definitions of quality surrounding the process of subject review and it is debateable whether it was able to satisfy fully any of these let alone reconcile them. However, that is not to say that those committed to a more scholarly approach to pedagogic practice in higher education have nothing to learn from subject review.

Contributions to the Scholarship of Teaching

While subject review might be dismissed by some as being of no great value, the stance adopted here is that from the perspective of the scholarship of teaching and quality in higher education more generally it does have something to offer. From the institutional and subject overview reports, it is possible to obtain a reasonably comprehensive picture, albeit an expurgated one, of provision at a particular point in time. They also provide a rich source of data for investigating different facets of educational practice, such as the reviewers' judgments regarding the quality of provision, their views on what was deemed to be good academic practice and issues and concerns warranting further scholarly enquiry.

A software package was used to facilitate engagement with the text of the subject review reports for business and management and the analysis of their content. The reports were downloaded from the QAA web site and pruned of standardised material. The remaining text was interrogated using a variety of laudatory and pejorative terms and phrases to highlight what the reviewers perceived as good practice and to identify where there was room for improvement. The selection of these terms was informed by a close reading of the subject overview report and a sample of institutional reports. Examples of laudatory terms include: 'positive', 'innovative(tion)', 'commend(ably/able)', 'exemplary', 'impressed(ive)', 'sound' and 'distinctive'; and of pejorative terms: 'weak', 'inadequate' and 'inconsistent'.

As previously noted, in the main the reports were written in a largely descriptive and anodyne style. Consequently, where strongly evaluative language was used this was a clear indication of something that reviewers felt was worth reporting. Laudatory and pejorative language was identified in relation to a range of reported instances of practice such as the development of student skills, assessment and feedback and peer observation.

On occasions, this language cut across the six aspects of provision indicating that reviewers were operating within an implicit, and shared, evaluative framework. By collating these comments electronically it was possible to identify a variety of pedagogic principles that informed the judgements of the reviewers. Before highlighting some of these principles, it needs to be emphasised that they are not acknowledged in any official pronouncements about subject review. Instead, as explained, they have been deduced from the content and language of the institutional and overview reports.

Flexibility

One notable principle was that of flexibility which, in this context, means providing students with as much choice as possible over when, how and what they study. For example, in the *Subject Overview Report for Business and Management*:

A strong feature ... is the flexibility offered to students in mode and time of attendance, entry and exit points, transfer between programmes and progression to further studies. (QAA, 2001a, para. 11)

Likewise, in one of the institutional reports the 'flexibility and student choice afforded by the curricular design' is identified as one of the 'positive features' of its provision (QAA, 2001g, para. 54).

Strategic thinking

Another principle was what can best be described as strategic thinking. Reviewers saw this as being particularly desirable for teaching, learning and assessment. Hence a number of providers were commended for having a 'well-defined and effective teaching and learning strategy' (QAA, 2001f, para. 15). By contrast, where it was reported that a provider did not have a strategy the tone was either one of regret or criticism. In one institutional report the reviewers commented:

However, the subject team has not yet articulated a coherent strategy [for teaching, learning and assessment] based on good practice and initiative demonstrated by individuals. (QAA, 2001j, para. 17)

As the wording of the *Subject Overview Report* indicates, strategies were also seen as being of particular value for student support and guidance and learning resources:

A great majority of institutions have appropriate overall strategies and policies for support and guidance and, in 30 per cent, these are reported as effective in informing and driving provision. (QAA, 2001a, para. 31)

Reports identified a sizeable majority (68 per cent) of institutions as having learning resource strategies in place that were generally judged to be effective in providing a framework for the acquisition, development and renewal of resources. (QAA, 2001a, para. 36)

Transparency

To some extent, having a strategy was seen as a *sine qua non* for another principle, that of transparency. Generally, providers attracted favourable comments where they could demonstrate that their students were fully aware of what was expected of them with respect

to learning outcomes, assessed tasks and how to improve their performance. Thus, one provider received praise because:

Module descriptions identify learning outcomes and how they are to be assessed. Current and former students expressed great confidence that they understood in advance the criteria that would be used for assessment of their work. (QAA, 2001c, para. 19)

Pedagogic pluralism

In delivering courses and programmes the use of a wide variety of teaching methods and assessment practices to reflect the multi-faceted nature of learning outcomes and diversity of learning styles was also seen as being highly desirable. Pedagogic pluralism of this kind was underlined as a positive element in the provision of several institutions. In one report, it was expressed as follows: 'the appropriate diversity of the methods for teaching and assessment' (QAA, 2001e, para. 51); in another 'carefully considered use of the appropriate teaching, learning and assessment tools to develop a reflective approach in students' (QAA, 2001l, para. 50); and another 'the variety of learning situations and assessment methods' (QAA, 2001k, para. 54).

Learner participation

In their evaluation of learning and teaching methods, a further principle applied by the reviewers was that of learner participation. In other words, they appeared to favour teaching practices and techniques that stimulate student involvement in the learning process. Thus, one institution was praised for its 'high-quality teaching, which promotes student interaction' (QAA, 2001i, para. 53).

Consistency

Another principle was that of consistency, specifically in the operation of processes that impact directly on students, such as marking, and that contribute to quality enhancement. Thus, not surprisingly, there was criticism of institutions where this principle was not yet in evidence:

There is an agreed new process for the management of assessments which has recently been introduced. This covers the specification of the assignment, learning outcomes, marking criteria and feedback forms. At the time of the review this process had not had time to become embedded. Review of student work from all levels and programmes revealed inconsistency in the application of the assessment process, including wide variation in the quality and quantity of written feedback to students. (QAA, 2001d, para. 19)

Where concerns of this kind were raised they tended to relate to aspects of assessment, especially feedback, with it being of 'variable quality ... in more than 40 per cent of institutions' (QAA, 2001a, para 23).

Collaboration

One principle that reflected the increasing recognition being given to collective nature of higher education was that of collaboration. From their reports, it would appear that reviewers were looking for evidence of co-operation between all the various contributors to the student learning experience (for example, information specialists, careers advisers, learning technologists). As the *Subject Overview Report* points out:

Liaison between academic and support staff is specifically commended in some 20 per cent of institutions, which helps students to access services quickly and appropriately. (QAA, 2001a, para. 33)

This clearly puts a 'positive spin' on the need for academics to work together with other staff in order to ensure a seamless web of provision.

Stakeholder involvement

The involvement of stakeholders (for example, students, employers, professional bodies) in quality management and enhancement was also something for which reviewers were looking. In the *Subject Overview Report*, pejorative language is used to relation to this principle, since it was frequently conspicuous by its absence.

The reviewers often found that employers and professional bodies were not involved effectively in quality assurance processes. (QAA, 2001a, para. 46)

Not surprisingly, however, where evidence was found of this principle being applied, the provider concerned was complemented. For example, in one institutional report the reviewers commented that they 'were particularly impressed with the strong culture of listening to and learning from students, employers and professional bodies' (QAA, 2001m, para. 41).

Self-criticism

A further principle in the sphere of quality was that of self-criticism. As the *Subject Overview Report* makes clear, the reviewers were expecting providers to be self-critical but found such an approach prevailed 'in only 8 per cent of institutions' (QAA, 2001a, para. 43).

Embedding good practice

A final principle, again relating to quality enhancement, was that of embedding good practice. From their reports, it is evident that reviewers were looking for robust ways in which this principle was being applied through staff development initiatives and more generally. Institutions were complimented for their induction programmes for new staff, teaching observation schemes and the 'recent appointment of a learning and teaching co-ordinator' (QAA, 2001b, para. 41). One institution was 'commended for the drawing up of a draft development plan, and for the intention to institute a rigorous audit of current practices, and to develop action plans with measurable success criteria and monitoring processes' (QAA, 2001h, para. 49).

Pragmatism and Theoretical Rationales

Undoubtedly an element of pragmatism pervades most of these principles. That said, some can be said to have a theoretical rationale. For example, while pedagogic pluralism might be justified by the need to keep students 'entertained', it can also be related to the work on learning styles. This suggests that within a typical cohort of students a variety of styles are likely to be represented and that these may well be correlated with academic performance (Marriott & Marriott, 2003). One implication of this is that, if the requirements of all students are to be accommodated within learning, teaching and assessment strategies, a plurality of methods may be necessary.

A second example is provided by the principle of learner participation, which clearly resonates with theories of action learning and active learning advanced by McGill and Beaty (1995) and by Biggs (1999). McGill and Beaty emphasise the collective aspect of learning and Biggs stresses the importance of engaging with learning tasks at the affective as well as the cognitive level (Fry *et al*, 1999), both are seen as essential pre-requisites for 'deep' learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976).

The principle of self-criticism offers a further example. Self-criticism is seen not as an exercise in masochism but as a crucial ingredient of what it means to be a reflective practitioner. Proctor (1993), in particular, stresses the role of criticality in reflective practice. As Moon observes, 'on this view, reflective practice is the process of looking back in a critical way at what has occurred and using the results of this process, together with professional knowledge ... to tackle new situations' (Moon, 1999, p. 59). By this means, progress can be made towards securing improvements in learning.

However, although such connections can be made, arguably most of the principles are more articles of faith than theoretically- or empirically-derived maxims. This is particularly the case where they appear to be more closely related to the lexicon of business and management and the provision of public services than to educational practice. For example, the principle of stakeholder involvement is derived from literature in the disparate fields of political science, strategic management and business ethics. Sensitivity towards, and a preparedness to act in the interests of, stakeholders has become practically an article of faith for the delivery of public services, including higher education, in the modern age. Similarly, the principle of flexibility is related to the broad social equality agenda that underpins the rationale for the introduction of a number of system-wide initiatives, including the accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning and the development of modular, credit-rated programmes.

Notwithstanding the eclectic nature of these principles, at the very least they do offer, to those committed to a more scholarly approach to learning and teaching, an agenda for action. In so doing, they can be said to resonate with that part of Kreber and Cranton's (2000) model which 'suggests that academics who practise the scholarship of teaching engage in content, process and premise reflection on research-based and experienced-based knowledge in the areas of instruction, pedagogy and curriculum in ways that can be peer reviewed' (Kreber, 2002, p. 153). Here the aim might be to validate or invalidate the principles through scholarly investigation into their derivation and application.

Where principles are found to be well-grounded then, at the micro-level of provision, they can serve as the basis of evaluative questions (Table 1). These questions can serve as a framework for critical reflection, which as several commentators claim is one of the key attributes of a scholarly approach to teaching (Andresen, 2000; Kreber, 2002).

TABLE 1. Examples of evaluative questions

Principle	Question
flexibility	Does the way in which the curriculum is designed and delivered maximise opportunities for student choice?
strategic thinking	What evidence could I produce to show that I have thought strategically about the design and delivery of my curriculum?
transparency	How clearly have the requirements of my curriculum been communicated to students (and other stakeholders) in language to which they can relate?
pedagogic pluralism	To what extent does the curriculum expose students to a variety of teaching methods and approaches to learning and how far are these constructively aligned with the learning outcomes and assessment tasks?
learner participation	What steps have I taken to provide opportunities for all my students, regardless of their backgrounds, learning styles and personalities, to be directly involved in the learning process?
consistency	What procedures have I embedded in the curriculum to ensure that students are treated consistently?
collaboration	Are arrangements in place for acknowledging and co-ordinating all the various contributions to the student learning experience?
self-criticism	In what ways do I subject my curriculum and performance to critical appraisal and review?
embedding of good practice	To what extent have I taken advantage of opportunities to discover more about good practice in learning and teaching and sought to apply it?

Conclusion

Although subject review had a number of weaknesses, there is still much to be learnt from it. It generated data that can serve to inform current debates on quality in higher education and the application of scholarship to learning and teaching. 'Fitness for purpose' was the explicit criterion for judging institutional standards. However, in practice, a number of pedagogic principles, which guided and informed the judgements of reviewers, suggest that an implicit evaluative framework was in operation representing a shared 'common sense' understanding of good practice. These implicit criteria provide a link to the scholarship of teaching, to the extent that it embraces notions of 'teaching excellence' (Morehead & Shedd, 1996).

If used creatively, evidence from subject review can provide a basis for synthesising two previously separate and distinctive discourses concerned with, on the one hand, quality and, on the other, the scholarship of teaching. Although their exponents might differ on means, both discourses have, as their desired end or goal, the enhancement of learning and teaching in higher education. For this reason alone the case for seeking a convergence between the separate literatures is a strong one.

Ironically, perhaps, the controversy surrounding subject review has made it harder to ignore the claims of those who argue for a more informed and rigorous approach to quality in higher education. If progress is to be made in pursuing the quality agenda the contribution of subject review should not be underestimated.

Note

- [1] The aim of the project was to capture and disseminate 'the richness of academic practice identified' in these reports (BEST, 2002). This involved identifying examples of good practice that were deemed

worthy of wider dissemination and following this up with the institutions concerned in order to research them more fully. Attention was also given to areas of weakness and poor performance and issues for business educators, which BEST might take the lead in addressing. Inherent in the project was the view that, whatever its limitations, subject review does have something to contribute to the wider academic community, particularly with respect to scholarship.

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