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Editorial

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Standards in higher education, whether in the UK or elsewhere, concern us all. Whether we are talking about our standards of teaching or facilities in the classroom, in the institution itself or at national level, we are keen to maintain and, indeed, improve these where we can. At a more 'local' level, our students make their voices heard through, for example, their feedback on modules and courses, both formally and informally. As they are a key group of 'stakeholders' in the education system, feedback from students allows us to find out what we are doing well and, naturally enough, where there is room for improvement. Given the impact both locally, in our own countries, and more widely (in the global economy, we wish to keep our reputation for excellence in our quality of provision of education at HE level), governments are keen to ensure that the stakeholders, current and potential, can be assured that standards are not only being maintained but, indeed, enhanced.

In the first article, entitled 'What is the impact of subject benchmarking?', Steve Pidcock points us to a report into Higher Education in the Learning Society. Although written for the UK context, it is doubtless applicable more widely. There are four main purposes of higher education: one, to help individuals to realize their potential; two, to foster knowledge and understanding; three, to serve local, regional and national needs; and four, to shape a democratic, civilized, inclusive society. Leaving aside the immensely difficult task of measuring, or even defining, what an 'inclusive' or a 'civilized' society might mean, it would seem that if we are to (better) understand what we are doing in order to make the continuous improvements that we wish to make, we need to consider these 'goals' which comprise the purpose of HE. This first article explains that the introduction of subject benchmarking in HE in the UK in 2000 was in part due to a perception, right or wrong, that the rapid and enormous increase in student numbers, the so-called 'massification' of HE, may in some way have led (or will lead) to 'lower standards'. Whether the standards are the same, lower or higher, it is no easy task. After all, the same as what, and when? The standards last year, or five years ago? And what, precisely, are these standards? Benchmarking of subjects (English, Law, Mathematics, etc.) is, according to the article, but one tool at our disposal in order to help in quality assurance.

As in industry, we need to carefully monitor and reflect on what we do, and make continuous improvements in all aspects of our provision. We are all doing the best that we can, but how do we know how our standards compare to those of our peers elsewhere? Whilst necessarily limited in terms of respondents, the study shows that the principles of quality assurance and the need for public accountability (we are, after all, funded through taxpayers) are accepted. In the early days, fears were expressed that having teams of 'inspectors' (although comprising colleagues working within, not outside of HE) would in some way diminish our autonomy, be overly bureaucratic and indeed not be able to deliver what it promised. Readers will be pleased to find out that, despite agreement that it has indeed introduced further bureaucracy and an increase in workload, standards are perceived as being no worse. Or better. Indeed, as one respondent remarked, like HE itself, it is just that things are different. Different is not 'bad', fortunately. After sifting through 2904 Subject Review Reports, it seems that 'HE provision . . . was generally found to be of very high quality'.

Quality assurance, but at the level of the individual educator, department and institution is the subject of the second article, by Steve Love and Rosa Scoble, entitled 'Developing a quality assurance metric: a panoptic view'. The authors describe the use of a matrix as the analytical tool which allows for an effective and 'tidy' collection of the views of the stakeholders, the drivers and the areas of interest. Their study suggests that, amongst other benefits, this tool allows for an easy switch between detail and summary – a common difficulty when wading through masses of data, not to mention paperwork, electronic or otherwise. Stakeholders extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom in the third article, by Thomas Bordelon and Iris Philips of Indiana in the USA, entitled 'Service-learning: what students have to say'. Service-learning, that is, doing voluntary work to help improve the lives of those in the local community, was perceived as valuable in many ways, although few had actually undertaken any such non-compulsory learning experience. How students allocate/spend their time is one of the themes in the fourth article, entitled 'The relation between self-regulated strategies and individual study time, prepared participation and achievement in a problem-based curriculum', by Marianne van den Hurk of the Netherlands. The study revealed that those who were better at planning their time and who had better self-monitoring skills worked/studied more efficiently.

Skills and abilities such as time management and self-regulation are but two factors impacting what students do or do not do at university. The experience of being a student involves development and change of one kind or another, which Amanda Baker, the author of the fourth article, entitled

'What else do students need? A psychodynamic reflection on students' need for support from staff at university', calls 'studenthood'. In this must-read article, readers will learn of the psychodynamic background which sheds light on our understanding of the role that our students assign to us, and the connections between mechanisms for social learning about self/identity and the identity-establishing responses which our students need at this stage of their personal development. The understanding of these will explain some of the difficulties that our 'troubled' students face and explores the issues surrounding 'help' and 'problems' before ending with some practical guidelines for us all.

Facing problems and needing help are as much issues for new academic members of staff as they are for students, particularly new ones. Whilst practices vary, we run induction programmes of one sort or another for our new students. Induction for new staff is, however, not without its difficulties, according to David Staniforth and Tony Harland, authors of the sixth and final article, entitled 'Contrasting views of induction: the experiences of new academic staff and their heads of department'. They suggest that there is much that we might be concerned about; new academic members of staff had low expectations for induction and heads of department saw induction as a brief event that began when the new academic member of staff started work. As the authors of this last article rightly say, induction should not be a short, sharp set of activities of one sort or another but should instead 'be the responsibility of everyone'. It was sobering to read that, in the study, 'human contact and everyday conversation were rare'. I cannot but concur with their view that, whilst we are naturally busy, 'we might do well to re-evaluate how we engage with others'. The induction that many arrange for their students, like that for staff described in this article, usually comprises a few days of activities as part of a brief event, with an assumption that they are on the road to becoming the autonomous, independent, self-directed learners that we wish them to be. In my view, we would do well to re-evaluate how we engage with new students, too.