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Did the market force Subject Review?

A case study

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ABSTRACT This study sought to discover if staff in a university department believed the 1998 Subject Review to be a valid Quality Assurance process and if its findings could benefit the department. Fifteen academic staff members took part in semi-structured interviews and the content of their responses was analysed qualitatively. Respondents described how Subject Review arose from an emerging ethos of accountability in public services and the demand for performance indicators from stakeholders. By considering their own viewpoints, as non-academics, they identified with these pressures and accepted the need for Subject Review. The methodology of Subject Review was well understood by staff and they explained how it was unnecessarily bureaucratic for its aims. Respondents suspected that the outcome of Subject Review would have an effect on the Department's place in the education marketplace and described why its impact would be minor. In explaining their views of Subject Review staff largely predicted the basis of the future quality assurance process.

KEYWORDS: *interview, qualitative research, subject review, teaching quality*

Introduction

Subject Review (SR) is the process of Quality Assurance (QA) in Higher Education (HE) in place in England and Wales, and the first cycle occurred between 1998 and 2000 (QAA, 1997). Although this particular QA exercise has been short lived, in a single country, it is part of a process that has affected HE in most developed countries for at least a decade (e.g. Crebbin, 1997). Many authors consider that QA programmes in the UK were born from the political environment of the 1980s that enforced efficiency gains across the whole of the public sector (Pollitt, 1987). However this underestimates the international imperative to develop QA

procedures in HE. Despite there being no evidence of a causal relationship between HE provision and national development, the OECD have suggested that increased access to HE and competence in the population are vital to global competitiveness (Woodhouse, 1996). Over the last 40 years there has certainly been increased participation in HE, as exemplified by the expansion in the UK from 6.5 per cent of school leavers in 1963 to 37 per cent in 2002 (DfES, 2002). Unfortunately, governments have become concerned that the expansion has been achieved at the expense of quality, which might in turn adversely affect economic health. Ironically through much of this period of expansion, public funding of HE has declined; for instance by 30% per student in England between 1991 and 1996 (Forth, 1996).

The publication of the Jarrett Report in 1985 (Jarrett, 1985) was a significant landmark for QA in English HE as it linked future development of HE with the introduction of Performance Indicators (PIs). PIs are a managerial construct used to compare a process both across time and between institutions (Pollitt, 1987). Such tools are used to measure an organization's effectiveness and efficiency, central tenets of the Conservative Government's policy (Sizer, 1988) at that time. Good PIs will demonstrate an organization's success and therefore are also a means by which consumers can make informed choices about where to obtain services (Pollitt, 1987). In this way HE is exposed to market forces. In 1988 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), charged with QA in England and Wales, decided to measure the teaching system rather than teaching itself (described by Elton, 1988). The PI approach chosen and refined for SR considers that quality HE can be delivered by academic staff becoming managers of learning (Brennan et al., 1997) working towards a set of defined institutional objectives. Notably, this stance separates the educational process from its outcomes, in keeping with a political will, at that time, to insist that academic standards are a matter for HE institutions (Forth, 1996).

This study seeks to explore the views of a cohort of academic staff regarding the external QA process of SR. The department studied embodies key aspects behind the current QA imperative: its non-clinical courses have seen a dramatic increase in numbers from around 30 entrants per annum in 1990 to 120 in 1998; prospective students have a choice of similar courses at surrounding pre-1992 and post-1992 (former polytechnic) universities; and the university prides itself on being a prestigious institution providing a high quality education. Additionally, in this context of increasing student load the staff group also teach basic medical sciences to gradually expanding cohorts of pre-clinical dental and medical students. This paper provides a detailed insight of how a particular staff cohort believes that SR might influence HE practice and quality and affect the position of their Department in the market.

Method

Sample and interviewing

The Head of Department of the Department of Biomedical Science gave the author permission to interview staff; 15 of 21 academic staff agreed to participate and were interviewed between September and November 1998. The participants included a range of academic staff including the Head and Deputy Head of Department, established readers/lecturers and newly appointed lecturers on probationary contracts. The non-participants were all established staff; two refused to be interviewed, the other four failed to reply to written and email messages. To discover both the form and reasons for staff perceptions an 'active interview' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) was adopted to build up an image of the respondent during the session. The interviews were conducted as an open discussion of the issues of SR and how they impinge on the department. An interview guide (see Figure 1) based on the aims of the study and the issues in the SR handbook (QAA, 1997) was referred to during the interviews to centre the discussion on key topics. Nonetheless, the respondents' ideas were the focus and so the path of each interview was unique.

Records and analysis

With the consent of respondents, all interviews were tape recorded and detailed written notes taken. Interviews were no longer than 90 minutes and tapes were transcribed within a week. The notes and transcripts were read line by line and, in a way derived from Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1967), each new theme became a category and each related phrase was fragmented and indexed into a cell of a word processor table. All of the interview data were collated into this table finally containing 1181 phrases sieved into 134 preliminary categories. The categories within the table were reviewed and compared with one another and those with similar themes coalesced. This exercise was repeated twice, reducing the data to 36 categories. Relevant data were collated into seven categories core to the study and the remainder, where discussion had strayed beyond the study, discarded.

Results

Twenty-two hours of interview yielded a considerable quantity of data. Data analysis discovered links and contradictions between respondents in three key areas:

- the origin of Subject Review
- the process of Subject Review
- external impact of Subject Review.

Subject Review Interview Checklist	Interviewee:	
At outset	Role in SR:	
1. Thank participant	Number & Date:	
2. Explain that I want their opinions about the areas they feel important and that session therefore unstructured		
3. Ask permission to record and note that they can stop if required		
4. I'll take some notes to help records		
Things to try to cover		
BMS and in general		
1. Is it a 'good thing'?		
2. Are the criteria valid?		
3. Is it done appropriately?		
4. Will it improve quality?		
5. Are the reports useful to the public?		
6. Why have we agreed to do it? rebel?		
The rationale of subject review		
1. Value for money		
2. Encourage quality		
3. Public information		
The process of review		
1. The review is by (self-) selected peers		
2. Self assessment against Aims and Objectives		
3. Review visit – are you apprehensive?		
4. Publication of dept. & nationwide reports		
The six aspects of provision		
1. Curriculum Design, Content & Organisation		
2. Teaching, Learning and Assessment		
3. Student Progression and Achievement		
4. Student Support and Guidance		
5. Learning Resources		
6. Quality Management and Enhancement		
Your role in the process		
1. Has your input been requested?		
2. Are your views / work taken seriously?		
3. Do you want to be more / less involved?		

Figure 1 The interview guide including a checklist to use with a respondent immediately prior to the interview and key headings to focus the session

The origin of Subject Review

All respondents agreed that SR was 'a good thing' but had diverse objections to it. They described how SR arose through the ethos of market forces. Some staff had an intrinsic belief in the market's efficacy:

My own preference [for funding] is outright market forces. You end up with the right result.

whilst others described a social structure which forces HE to follow the political environment derived from Thatcherism of the 1980s:

There is now an ethos of everything, not just teaching and research, being counted and assessed so we accept.

This passive acceptance of managerialism, voiced by several staff, was in contrast to statements of how academics prefer to work autonomously:

The independence is, I suspect, one reason why people of a naturally rebellious nature gravitate towards university work.

Respondents reconciled these views by acknowledging their responsibility to society through looking at HE from the perspective of either parents or taxpayers:

There is always a need for people to be accountable . . . if I wasn't involved in academia I would want an objective system to provide information on whether I was spending money appropriately.

A new, young staff member suggested that he thought this was due to being socialized during the 1980s, although the issue of accountability was raised across the age spectrum. Certainly there were many comments that HE had been too introverted and independent for too long. The concept of stakeholders in HE can collate ideas about to whom HE is accountable and what constitutes appropriate funding.

The role of stakeholders

Students are the obvious customers of HE but there was not a consensus of how staff considered students to view this role, even in relation to the increase in numbers. In one case it was suggested that the increase in student numbers had resulted in them being less keen:

You have lots of students coming through with a fair proportion of them not really knowing what they are doing here, not overly interested in the subject matter.

whereas another respondent located failure within the department itself:

. . . our problems come from the way we teach them. We have too many to do it effectively in the way we do it.

Another view put forward in several ways was that the expectations of staff and students are not congruent:

. . . we have a problem with the types and expectations of students not necessarily meshing with what we as a [research-led] university expect of them . . .

and that attempts to align expectations resulted in personal criticism as students may not recognize good teaching and staff are unclear of the department's role in society.

It was stated that the university was established to serve the local community but there was disagreement as to what this entailed. This lack of clarity was exemplified by attitudes to the role of employers in shaping courses. A simple view of the market suggests that the department will be successful if staff:

. . . include what we think is appropriate and we will be judged in terms of the people doing the course by employers.

whereas other staff directly opposed this view:

It is a course for your own personal development. This is one of the privileges of being able to do a university course. I defend that, I'm opposed to the idea that courses should have a prescribed outcome and that you enrol at 18 to fill a role in later life.

Furthermore, it was suggested that very few employers directly fund HE and therefore have little right to influence courses directly. As the vast majority of HE is funded by central government, staff noted that it is the most powerful stakeholder, even though money comes from taxpayers. This powerful axis was considered to have a poor impression of HE institutions and staff:

. . . we are not understood by the rest of society. We think that they think little of us . . .

One respondent suggested that in part this resulted from HE staff having a 'free ride' in the 1960s, but many others explained that the poor impression arose from ignorance of the diverse tasks undertaken by a highly competent staff:

Public perception would be amazed that universities are appointing people with the experience they have for the salaries. We are not here for the money but the level of work and responsibility is above that perceived.

Either way, staff felt that HE was in a position where 'we couldn't prove we were good' to the diverse stakeholder groups resulting in the imposition of SR.

The process of Subject Review

The majority of staff stated that they did not fully understand the process of SR despite having seen the QAA's documentation. Nonetheless they were well aware that SR examines the process of Management by Objectives (MBO) of teaching rather than the teaching itself. A high proportion of staff accepted that assessment of the difference between intentions and achievements and 'do we have the means to do it?' are good indicators of

a department's QA. Importantly a number of respondents voiced concerns that a department could, in theory, falsify its entire management cycle, or at the very least construct an impression of reality:

Assessors are not really seeing what's going on. They are seeing what the department has been preparing for 18 months to show it

More positively, most staff believed that their department had made a genuine attempt to involve all staff and that the generation of the requisite paperwork had frequently been associated with procedural improvements:

. . . staff are striving to get a good score, but in doing so they are improving quality by updating practice and starting to document what was often taking place already.

However a few staff suggested exactly the converse:

It feels a bit like anything political, that it becomes a game to make the paper whilst carrying on with what they were doing before.

and they all reported that the process was excessively burdensome and probably distracting already over-stretched staff from other duties.

External impact of Subject Review

Subject Review appeared to have caused staff to acknowledge a need to change to respond to the climate of measurable excellence. They described how opinions on the quality of HE in the past were based largely upon hearsay and that SR may provide an opportunity to say something objective about quality in a given department. Many staff believed that a positive outcome of SR, and to a large degree independent of its findings, is the increased profile of teaching in HE and the significance of it within the work of academics:

Importantly it increases the status of teaching within universities and makes all staff, including the VC, realize that this is an intrinsic part of our activity and it should be good . . .

Notably several staff commented that SR had forced the vice-chancellor (VC) to take a greater interest in teaching to maintain the university's reputation and that a poor outcome in SR may lead to closure of affected departments, establishing the idea that ' . . . there should be some consequence of the outcomes'.

SR and the market

Staff were well aware that the QAA are answerable to the public and committed to publishing their findings. This was seen to be beneficial as it

would be a means for HE to demonstrate its accountability to stakeholders and thus strengthen its position in society:

At the end of the day we have to have a mandate from the taxpayer to allow us to do what we do. If we can demonstrate that we are fully accountable and that our product is an important one, then that mandate will get stronger and thus define our role. This could potentially be a positive outcome.

The published reports were frequently discussed as a potential factor affecting student recruitment to the department. A good report was suggested to be a 'good marketing tool' as informed schools and parents would use such reports when advising students, especially as many parents will have adopted the 'measure it' ethos. Most staff explained that they believed the reports would be simplified into 'league tables' by newspapers:

What's this got to do with teaching quality? . . . 'League tables' is what we are taking about . . . it's the bottom line isn't it. To produce reports that A is better than B. Well I can understand this.

Such tables were seen to be an element that would contribute to a holistic impression of an institution more than the full report on a specific department. The image of a university was seen to arise from an impression of quality, geographic factors such as access and local attractions and the preferences of friends and family. Many respondents thought that SR may play only a minor part in this:

I think, even now, that geography is probably more important to entrants than quality. For example, [university name] is at best mediocre, but is very popular as it is near major conurbations.

Staff also explained that they realized they had prejudices concerning the quality of HE institutions and suspected that they, and the families of prospective students, would have difficulty in changing their opinions on the basis of SR alone:

It will need several generations of graduates for the written evidence to overcome past prejudice.

Nonetheless, most respondents considered that prospective students and their advisers would use SR to an extent. It would thereby influence recruitment to some degree and thus have secondary financial consequences. They acknowledged that QAA and HEFCE had not linked future HE funding to QAA findings but suspected:

. . . that the VC will use it for internal funding distribution.

A few respondents discussed how a poor result may show that a

department warranted additional support but doubted that this would occur; likewise they did not anticipate a reward for a good result:

We get high marks or low marks and suffer the horrible consequences either way. I'm cynical . . . we can't win.

Collectively, these data show that the respondents held a range of often contradictory views.

Discussion

Qualitative analysis of these data revealed a spectrum of attitudes to SR. All staff considered that the political imposition of market forces upon HE had led to QA procedures but there was a range of views of the desirability of this. Respondents were able to describe the managerial rationale for the QA process but there was a consensus that it may be possible to achieve a high SR score without delivering what staff believed is a quality education. Although SR may well increase the 'marketability' of the department, staff described how its impact was likely to be minor and that the most significant outcome may be an increased status of teaching within HE institutions. This sample of staff, like others before them, are generally supportive of the principle of SR although dubious of the precise method (Sanders, 1994). Acceptance for SR arose from an acknowledgement that the academic profession had failed to justify itself to other HE stakeholders so that assessment was overdue (Howarth, 1995). By encouraging staff to view themselves as stakeholders in HE as academics, taxpayers and parents they outlined how they felt some personal desire to demonstrate their skills and provide external accountability. However there were concerns that SR was probably not the optimum tool.

Prior to the introduction of teaching quality assessment it had been suggested that institutions would not comply with imposed QA systems (Husbands, 1992) and this scenario was discussed with respondents. It was widely suggested that the converse was more likely and there were frequent references to pressures from 'the institution' being eager to prove itself in the HE marketplace. This aspect was clearly prominent in respondents' minds as they had well developed arguments to explain the degree to which SR would affect recruitment based on their views of society's acceptance of the 'evaluative state' (Brennan et al., 1997). Thus respondents who suggested that the public had little faith in the use of PIs in public service would be more concerned by the particular circumstances of a department. For example, staff explained how the department benefited from its location and this probably strengthened its position in the market and enabled it to attract an excess of UCAS applicants. This confirms the view

of Tight (2000) that in certain institutions geographical factors are more important than high SR scores. The uncertainty over the impact of SR data on student intake was no different to the views on the impact of SR on other stakeholders. Moreover there was little agreement on the power that such stakeholders should wield:

We are trying to decide on behalf of the nation what skills may be useful.

This statement encapsulates a current problem within HE as the proportion of graduates in the workforce increases. Staff recognized that in the past they were providing a course designed to train a few career scientists whereas now the course is for a large cohort of students with diverse aspirations and different career opportunities to their predecessors. In particular this was suggested to conflict with the department's intention to provide research-led teaching, much of which may be inappropriate to the student cohort. This situation illustrates a potential weakness in SR in that the target objectives are set by the HE providers, and therefore the outcomes of the educational processes are distinct for each provider. Quality is sometimes described as fitness for purpose (Juran, 1979), but if that purpose is ill-defined by society, even if a given department fulfils its objectives, how can the educational quality be assessed? This is probably why the majority of PIs used in HE relate to the more readily quantified efficiency in training rather than quality of learning (Ball and Halwahi, 1987).

The discussion of these arguments by respondents revealed a thorough understanding of how the MBO process of SR would be applied to the department. Many respondents presented opinions on the limitations of the application of PIs to HE congruent with those discussed by Ball and Halwahi (1987), implying that comments denying an understanding of SR were ill-founded. In a similar fashion, staff were concerned by the absence of clear outcomes of the SR process at all levels from government to department. Such an environment encouraged rumours and cynicism and probably added to the belief that SR is largely a paper exercise. It may even serve to perpetuate the belief that teaching is considered less important than research when the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a vital factor in providing funding for research. The use of a numeric scale to grade the assessment was also seen as evidence that an unwritten aim of SR may be to reduce funding by closing poorly ranked departments.

A stated aim of SR was to improve quality (QAA, 1997) but the respondents were doubtful that it would do this effectively. It was suggested that by producing the documentary evidence of the department's MBO systems these systems would themselves be improved, leading to improved QA. The most significant impact was suggested to be ensuring that staff examine their practice, leading to a change in normality. Naturally many staff

believed that the HE provision in their department and elsewhere was already of a high standard and suggested that in itself SR was wasteful and drawing staff away from other duties. One respondent correctly predicted that the QA process of 2000 would be unique and not repeated. The aims and objectives of the 2002–2005 Institutional Audit (IA) QA process are comparable to those of SR (QAA, 2002). There are, however, two key differences.

First, the new process takes place at an institutional level and assumes that they will have in place detailed audits of their teaching processes in each discipline. Second, the use of Subject Benchmarks provides a framework for attainment. Audit of the institution rather than every subject area should reduce the cost of IA to both QAA and HE institutions. During SR there were 5802 opportunities for unsatisfactory grades to be awarded but only seven were given (Underwood, 2000), implying that SR was an expensive way to identify a minimal amount of poor provision. The IA process retains the MBO approach but accepts many respondents' view that SR was an excessive burden on individual teaching departments. Review at the institutional level occurred a decade ago in Australia so as to encourage holistic changes to planning and management (Harman, 1996). Several respondents suggested that as some staff had been trained as QAA assessors there might be an opportunity for internal assessment and dissemination of good practice in the future. To an extent this has occurred with the requirement that disciplines must demonstrate internal 'audit trails'. This also encourages maintenance of systems developed by departments for SR, which if adequate, negate the need for visits (Elton, 1988). Moreover, determining the degree of inspection required based on past performance is congruent with other governmental QA processes, for example Ministry of Defence procurement (Alderman, 1996b). Respondents had described that they believed post-1992 universities would have better QA systems but that pre-1992 universities may provide better teaching. IA avoids the pitfalls of determining the level of inspection by maturity (Alderman, 1996a) by reviewing the institution's QA system just eight weeks before the visitation. Respondents considered that the published reviews of departmental SR would support the image of an institution and this possible confusion for stakeholders has been removed by the publication of institutional reports.

Second, by including reference to Subject Benchmark Statements the new process has included an element of defining frames of reference for a course, but avoided prescription of course outcome. This starts to address the 'purpose' aspect of quality by establishing what is understood to be required by stakeholders of a particular HE course. A key aspect in which IA retains features of SR is recruitment of auditors. Respondents discussed what made a good assessor for SR (data not shown) and the principal factor

was that they should be academic peers if the process was to be credible to staff within the assessed unit. This may reduce the credibility of the process to other stakeholders but is essential for professional quality improvement (Elton, 1988).

These interviews were undertaken before the department's SR and by their own admission staff were relatively ignorant of the detail of SR. However, their involvement in the QA processes is evident from their insight into the underpinning of SR and that the new proposal incorporates many of their concerns. One, now retired, respondent summed it up well:

Quality wasn't low and won't necessarily improve but the key impact is that we will have systems which allow us to monitor and correct if elements fall down.

By identifying the views and beliefs of 'frontline' academics this case study has shown that they accept a need to be accountable to other stakeholders in HE but they suspect the emergence of QA to be driven by political dogma rather than a genuine desire by the administration to improve quality. Staff weighed up their attitudes as academics, taxpayers and parents and predicted that SR would provide a small benefit to the department in the student marketplace. Despite their self-proclaimed ignorance of QA processes they correctly identified limitations of the SR process and predicted features of the new system introduced for 2002/03. This suggests that the respondents had engaged thoroughly with the need for QA and to this extent SR was successful in this department. It is impossible to assume that this case study reflects the views of staff in all departments of HE institutions. The department studied is in a pre-1992 university with an institutional objective to provide research-led teaching. Respondents and those in other studies (Alderman, 1994) have suggested that post-1992 universities had well established QA procedures and would find SR simple. However the converse has been found to be true in both England and Australia (Harman, 1996) as well-funded established institutes tended to gain higher scores (Alderman, 1994; 1996a).

Although research and teaching are both learning processes they are assessed through separate PI processes in England. Unfortunately the products of the two (i.e. papers and graduates) are the focus of assessment rather than the underlying learning by both staff and students. This dichotomy may cause institutions to adopt managerial processes for audit rather than quality enhancement (Rowland, 2000). It may be, therefore, that excellence in preparation for the RAE confers an advantage when approaching SR. General theories on the impact of SR, or other QA processes, may be drawn if the study were extended through 'triangulation'

– a process analogous to finding one's position by reference to landmarks (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This requires further sampling to enrich the data, possibly by undertaking a similar study in another department or by obtaining data from other stakeholder groups. Nonetheless, the findings are largely in accordance with those of other studies. In surveying the impact of TQA, which immediately preceded SR, Underwood (2000) summarized that the major benefit had been to improve departments' self-criticality and QA housekeeping processes. Students' impression of quality education has been reported to centre on the staff/student relationship and the flexibility and effectiveness with which staff facilitate learning (Hill et al., 2003). It is unlikely that SR assessed this at all nor that IA will, as it is difficult to define the objectives of dynamic teaching (Ball and Halwahi, 1987). These QA systems are designed to assess if HE and its staff are competent performers and cannot identify the flexible experts (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980) sought by the most questioning students.

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