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Quality assurance in Regional Centres

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of quality assurance is now firmly on agendas in Higher Education. In a recent edition of *Open Learning* a report was given of an international conference to discuss the issue (Brindley, 1994). Within the UK, there is a dual system in operation. The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals has set up a Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) to undertake quality audits of universities. The Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) is responsible for the quality assessment of teaching. A joint statement on the respective responsibilities for quality assurance of the two bodies was issued in January 1994 (HEFCE, 1994). The Open University in the UK (OUUK) has now had experience of both these processes. Understandably, this has provoked a very wide debate of quality issues within the OUUK.

Quality assurance in the OUUK

The OUUK has always maintained that it is a 'quality institution'. The distance learning materials produced by the OUUK have won a very high world-wide reputation for quality. However, the OUUK is a large and complex organisation with many interdependencies. The discussions on quality assurance across the range of services offered to the individual learner have provoked an interesting debate. This paper looks at some aspects of the quality assurance debate as it affects the Regional Centres in the OUUK.

The regional network

The OUUK has its main headquarters at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes and has a network of thirteen Regional Centres covering the United Kingdom. (Two of these centres look after students in Continental Western Europe and the Republic of Ireland respectively.) The Regional Centres vary considerably in size, from those looking after just under 4 per cent of the student population to those looking after over 11 per cent of the student population. In a paper of this length, it is not possible to describe fully the details of the division of responsibilities between Walton Hall and the Regional Centres. However, a useful working definition for the purpose of this paper is that staff at Walton Hall are responsible for those elements of learner support which are common to all OUUK students wherever they are located: for example, the creation and production of course materials and the Provision of the common administrative systems. In addition,

specialist services such as credit transfer are located at Walton Hall. Regional Centres are responsible for providing the services which support the student as an individual. All students on the same course receive the same course materials; it is at the regional level that support is provided to tailor these materials to the needs of the individual learner. Hence, the Regional Centre provides a service of educational advice and guidance to students in the region and to those enquiring about study with the OUUK. Specialist services such as support for students with disabilities and vocational guidance are also provided. Staff in the Regional Centre are responsible for recruiting part-time tutors and counsellors and for the ongoing monitoring and support of these staff. It is also a responsibility of the Regional Centre to secure suitable accommodation for the network of study centres located throughout the region. To give some idea of the scale of this operation, the author of this paper works in one of the largest Regional Centres which caters for the needs of over 17,000 students, has a network of 26 study centres and recruits over 800 part-time tutors and counsellors. The Regional Centre employs range of staff: secretarial/clerical, administrative and academic, giving a total of more than 80 people.

Quality assurance in Regional Centres

A useful set of questions has been posed by the Higher Education Quality Council in a recent publication (HEQC, 1994) in order to assist institutions to look at their current practice.

- What are you try to do?
- Why are you trying to do it?
- How are you doing it?
- Why are you doing it that way?
- Why do you think that is the best way of doing it?
- How do you know it works?
- How do you improve it?

The questions quoted above provided a useful way of looking at the ways in which we support individual students from our Regional Centres, and have helped us to reflect on current practice within the context of the quality assurance debate. The outcome from this debate has been interesting: it has become clear to us that many of the routine practices which we have developed over the years, and very much take for granted, do in fact provide effective quality assurance mechanisms. This paper describes some of these, particularly as they relate to our work with part-time tutors and counsellors. (Part-time tutors and counsellors in the OUUK are referred to as tutorial and counselling staff, abbreviated in this paper to T & C staff).

APPOINTMENT, INDUCTION AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT OF TUTORIAL AND COUNSELLING STAFF

OUUK students have access to a range of learning materials presented on various media for each course for which they register. In addition, they are allocated to one or more members of the University's T & C staff who provide them with individual support both

face-to-face and at a distance. The T & C staff play a vital role in the OUUK student support system. It is they who provide the support which ensures that the needs of the individual learner are recognised and met within the OUUK system. The amount of work for which each member of T & C staff is contracted varies considerably and depends on various factors, including, for example, the length of the course, whether tutoring only responsibilities or a combination of tutoring and counselling responsibilities are taken on.

The OUUK recognises that its T & C staff play a vital role within the institution by ensuring that it has effective procedures in place for their recruitment and support. These procedures provide a very important part of our quality assurance framework and are described below. However, before giving these details, some idea of the scale of the operation would be useful. As mentioned earlier, in the author's region there are over 800 members of T & C staff. These staff are recruited and supported by around 20 academic and academic-related staff working from the Regional Centre. The geographical area covered by a Regional Centre varies enormously (e.g. the London Region covers a very small geographical area as compared with the Scottish region which covers the whole of Scotland).

Recruitment

The recruitment of T & C staff is one of the major tasks for a Regional Centre. This has been a core task from the start. However, over the past couple of years more attention has been given to operating across all Regional Centres using a set of common core procedures. A working group was set up to undertake this task and a formal publication has now been produced. *Guide for the Appointment of Tutorial & Counselling Staff*, (GATACS, 1994).

The purpose of the Guide is to set out agreed practice in relation to issues such as the need for job descriptions and personal specifications, good shortlisting practice, good conduct of interviews etc.

The attempt to reach agreed procedures has not been without its controversial aspects. However, the exercise had made the staff involved look hard at the existing practice. It is hoped that care taken at the time of initial appointment will help to ensure the quality of staff recruited as T & C staff. At the end of the first appointment cycle using the new Guide, a review has been undertaken to ask all those involved to give their views on what has and what has not worked, so that modifications can be made for the future.

Induction

Each new member of T & C staff is provided with an induction programme. Part of this induction will be provided by written materials produced by the OUUK for all T & C staff. However, there will also be briefing sessions - these are usually face-to-face sessions, and where possible, include the opportunity to meet other new colleagues. A member of staff completely new to the OUUK will be briefed in respect of her/his role (e.g. what is the role of a tutor in the OUUK) and, where a specific course is involved, briefed on relevant academic aspects of the course. Within the induction programme, particular attention is paid to those aspects of the role which are likely to be new to many taking up a post with the OUUK for the first time. One of the most important of these is correspondence tuition. The comments written by a tutor on a student's tutor-marked assignments (TMAs), submitted as part of the continuous assessment process,

provide the one guaranteed element of individual learner support since not all students can or want to attend face-to-face tutorials. Effective correspondence tuition is a skill which many new members of T & C staff find difficult initially. Hence, a number of different 'hands on' exercises have been devised to try and help at the induction stage.

Although initial staff development sessions are held at the beginning of the period in which a member of T & C staff starts work with the OUUK, there is the opportunity for further help and support, either face-to-face or by Telephone, throughout the two-year probationary period.

Mentoring

Each new member of T & C staff (the mentee) is paired with an existing member of T & C staff (the mentor) with the same course/role responsibilities. The mentor is paid a fee for undertaking this role. Slightly different arrangements exist in different regions but in the author's region, guidelines for mentors and mentees have been drawn up so that both parties are clear about what can be expected. An evaluation has recently been undertaken using pairs of mentor/mentee to investigate the working of the scheme. All were enthusiastic about the scheme and have suggested some modifications to the guidelines to improve the effectiveness.

Staff development after the first two years

After the first two probationary years, members of T & C staff are given the opportunity to attend a staff development event provided by Regional Centre staff at least every two years. They are able to study OUUK courses free of charge (or at a reduced rate for some courses). In addition, there is a limited amount of funding available to which T & C staff can bid to help with attendance at external conferences/courses.

Staff development materials

The OUUK has produced an extensive range of staff development and reference materials for use by its T & C staff. These range from a publication geared mainly towards the needs of new staff, which describes fully the roles of T & C staff through to a detailed reference file which aims to give quick reference to the necessary information for all aspects of the tasks to be undertaken. The current materials have recently been reviewed and are now being redeveloped. One of the additions to the new materials will be the inclusion of activities which encourage T & C staff to reflect on the performance of their role: the reflective practitioner approach.

In order to enhance the quality of support offered by T & C staff, a series of 'Toolkits' have been written. These cover study skills and student support topics as follows:

- Learning how to learn
- Reading and note taking
- Writing skills
- Revision and examinations
- Students with disabilities: some guidelines
- Effective tutorials
- Supporting 'personal and career development'
- Tutoring and counselling students in prison

· Supporting students with mental health difficulties.

The aim of these publications is to give practical help and advice to T & C staff in supporting their students. The publications dealing with study skills offer practical suggestions/workshop materials which can be used directly by T & C staff with their student groups. The OUUK has put very considerable efforts into the production of staff development materials. It recognises the time pressures within which part-time staff operate and aims to provide materials which cut-down on the amount of preparation which individuals need to make. In addition, it is an essential element of the quality assurance process.

MONITORING AND SUPERVISION OF TUTORIAL AND COUNSELLING STAFF

Academic and academic related staff working in Regional Centres are responsible for the recruitment, staff development, monitoring and supervision of T & C staff. Each new member of T & C staff has a two year probationary period at the end of which all aspects of their performance are considered in order to decide whether an extended contract should be issued.

Correspondence tuition

All members of T & C staff with a tutoring function have their correspondence tuition monitored throughout the time they are working for the OUUK. The number of scripts for a given tutor marked assignment (TMA) which are monitored for each tutor depends on how long the tutor has been working for the OUUK; the newer the tutor the more scripts that are monitored. In addition, if the standard of correspondence tuition for a longer serving tutor is giving cause for concern, then a higher number of scripts will be monitored for a period. Feedback to the tutor from the monitoring process is made on a standard form which indicates performance in relation to a number of headings. In addition, the form is frequently accompanied by a letter from the regional person responsible for the faculty which may offer a further perspective on the monitoring report. There is also a national statistical analysis of TMA marks undertaken, the results of which are fed back to individual tutors. In addition to the monitoring of quality of correspondence tuition, there is a system which checks whether a tutor has failed to return any marked scripts by a given date. When this happens the Regional Centre is alerted so that urgent follow up can take place.

There is, therefore, a clearly identifiable quality assurance process in place in relation to correspondence tuition. However, the monitoring process is also an essential part of the staff development process; help and advice can be offered where a tutor is having difficulty.

Study centre visits

The monitoring of performance in face-to-face sessions presents more difficulties because of the geographical distances involved and the amount of time, therefore, required by Regional Centre staff to visit T & C staff. However, it is the intention that every member of T & C staff should receive at least one visit at a face-to-face session during the two-year probationary period. In the author's region, written guidelines have

been drawn up to describe the basis on which these visits will be conducted. The guidelines are for use by both fulltime and T & C staff and express the objectives for such visits as follows:

- to observe practice
- to create opportunities for jointly reflecting on such practice
- to respond to previously articulated needs and concerns
- to enhance the links between full-time and T & C staff.

Hence, the quality assurance aspect is again firmly linked with the staff development of the individual member of T & C staff.

Student feedback

Mechanisms for student feedback are currently at the centre of considerable debate within the OUUK nationally. It is not within the scope of this paper to do justice to this topic. However, one aspect of student feedback is mentioned here as being particularly relevant in the context of this paper. T & C staff are encouraged to use feedback forms with their own students in order to encourage an ongoing dialogue between the member of T & C staff and the student group. Sample feedback forms are sent to T & C staff so that they can select/modify a particular format to suit their particular needs.

Team working

In all the activities described above, Regional Centre staff will be working to encourage a feeling of team working with the T & C staff. Staff development activities within a region are coordinated by a working group which includes members of T & C staff. They thus have the opportunity to express the staff development needs of T & C staff and to help to develop the programme which will meet these needs.

In the author's region all staff development sessions have an evaluation form for participants so that there is feedback to the session leader(s). It is perhaps revealing that a number of new T & C staff have expressed the view that they have had more staff development in their first few months with the OUUK than in many years previously in their full-time jobs!

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described how the issue of quality assurance is handled in Regional Centres in relation to activities involving T & C staff. As can be seen, a great deal of effort and resource is dedicated to this area of activity. It is recognised that the quality of support received by each individual learner is affected by the quality of the T & C staff with whom they come into contact. It is, therefore, considered that this is an area which justified this level of support.

As indicated at the start of this paper, the topic of quality assurance is currently being discussed widely within the OUUK. This has caused staff in Regional Centres to reflect on current practice and to conclude that there is much that is good already in place. However, there is no room for complacency. While it is acknowledged that the best

practice is really excellent, there are still changes to be made to ensure that this best practice is available to all students.

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