

Going for Gold

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The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) External Subject Review process was not welcomed by the majority of UK academic departments in 2000. Peer review of learning and teaching was something new. The Information Science Department at Loughborough University was no exception. Immediately prior to the review process, the academic mem-

bers of staff in the department were debating the very concept of peer review. This paper describes how departmental staff was brought together as a team to focus energy and effort into the QAA process to gain the maximum benefit from it. The team building is colourfully described and a resulting top score for the department was achieved.

The rules of engagement

The decision to enter the national event of quality review was not wholly ours. It was taken for, and from us, by others, namely the official body the Office for Standard in Education the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA is the watchdog for the higher education consumer. The QAA assessment criteria are drawn up in conjunction with the professional bodies. For the Library and Information discipline, the individual subject benchmark statement was based upon the Joint Accreditation Instrument created by The (then) Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, CILIP).

The "statement" provides the yardstick for measuring the content delivery of individual courses, a part of the QAA process called External Subject Review (ESR). Each part of the Teaching and Learning process would be examined using the set six themes to be known as "Aspects":

- Curriculum design, content and organisation;
- Teaching learning and assessment;
- Student progression and achievement;
- Student support and guidance;

- Learning resources;
- Quality management and enhancement.

Thus it was decided that in the academic year 2000–2001 Library and Information departments in higher education would undergo the External Subject Review process.

The qualifying round

We knew it was coming but not exactly when. Then almost overnight after several months of speculation a choice of two dates for participation was given.

Neither was a good draw, either the inside lane or the far side. We chose the inside lane knowing we could start quicker and sensing some advantage to this. So the date and time were set. Our External Subject Review (ESR) was to be October 2–4, 2000, the group – Information and Library Studies – the stadium – the Department of Information Science, Loughborough University. The other qualifiers were also specified, including: Sheffield, City, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, and Thames Valley universities; we knew them all and even had exchanged some players and managers over the years from different parts of the league. So we knew that we had a tough game ahead.

The officials

The major difference in this national event was that this game would be played by the same rules solely by each team on home ground with a different set of officials from the other teams presiding and an independent chairman governing each separate event. Each team was requested to suggest a member of their academic staff to undertake the training to become an official for the game, to be subsequently known as a "Reviewer". The Reviewers once selected were trained for their roles prior to the first game being held. The Reviewers would be selected by the QAA for their game to match individual's expert subject knowledge with the individual departmental profile. The Chairman was to be chosen from a bank of personnel with expert procedural knowledge of ESR but no subject knowledge. Subsequently three or four reviewers plus a chairman were chosen for each team. For the game at Loughborough three Reviewers were considered necessary and the team at Loughborough were subsequently notified of these personnel. The rules of engagement allowed each team to consider the chosen reviewers and reject any individual that was thought to be unsuitable, in practice this meant if a selected reviewer did not hold the required specialist knowledge of their intended review team they could be rejected.

The notification of the names of the reviewers was given to Loughborough in August and team opinion was to accept the QAA choice without question.

The players – The Loughborough Team

The announcement of the fixture time and place gave immediate thought to the training of the team. This was begun some nine months prior to the start of the event with the occasional paper and procedure being written. However it was not until the beginning of May some six months prior to the event that a departmental co-ordinator was appointed to oversee the whole training of the team.

Central University appointments had also been made at this time to give guidance and support to the departmental staff. The University Quality Assurance Unit consisted of three full time members of staff and one part time member. It was proposed that one of the full time members of

staff be housed in Department of Information Science to assist with preparation of documentation and procedures required for the ESR some months prior to the review.

Initially there were questions as where could this extra resource be situated? Also raging at this time was the rather academic debate as to why we should be participating at all? Once fully debated the team agreed that it would be sensible at this stage to allocate a room to the ESR process and the associated University personnel, as the room would be required in the review period in October. Subsequently this occurred and the departmental co-ordinator and the member of the university QAA staff began to plan the training of the staff.

The first goal, own goal?

The initial part of the ESR process was begun in late 1999 early 2000 and submission of the Self-Assessment Document (SAD) was required by the QAA in May 2000. The QAA specified the length of the document and it could not exceed this. Each statement should be able to be supported by evidence by more than one element. The SAD detailed the criteria by which the department would be subsequently reviewed, listing all programmes, student statistics, procedures and protocols. The difficulty in producing the SAD was what exactly should it say? Too much detail may be difficult to support with the appropriate evidence and too little would invite too many searching questions at the time of review. The Loughborough team all contributed in various ways to produce the SAD, writing a paragraph or two to illustrate a procedure or adding details of student progression to highlight the programme development. The SAD was agonised over and many amendments made before all were satisfied that the short document stated every relevant detail of Learning and Teaching process within the department.

The process of writing the SAD together with multiple contributions and equal amounts of editing was the first learning curve for the staff. This also generated the first signs of stress amongst the staff, anxiety to get the words right was paramount and palpable. Learning to trust others to write material and acknowledge that this material was representative of the whole department and not the views of that particular individual was

required. The learning to trust and accepting of a collective view was considered vital by the departmental ESR co-ordinator to ensure that everyone in the team felt ownership of the document. By producing the SAD the Loughborough team had, in management theory terms, come through the first two elements of Team Working – “Forming” and “Norming”. The Forming stage was already established as members of the department already worked together, therefore staff was displaying classic signs of being polite, impersonal, guarded and watchful in various degrees of shade in the early days of writing the SAD. The “Norming” or doing stage of team working, i.e. getting started, developing skills, establishing procedures, getting feedback, having a high task orientation, confronting issues and assessment of competence quickly followed and developed over the weeks when the team were fully engaged in the writing and discussion of the SAD. In addition, the production of the SAD to meet the QAA deadline was taken as proof that despite many individual differences of opinion the Loughborough team could work towards the same objective and achieve a goal. Time would tell if the SAD were to be an “Own Goal” or a triumph as indicated in the article by Goulding and Harrison (2001).

Training – team roles

It quickly became obvious that the individual team members would need to be given specific tasks, responsibilities and target dates, if all the targets in the six aspects of ESR were to be achieved. May to September is commonly acknowledged in university circles as not the best time to focus the academic mind on teaching related activities. However, this was the given time frame and it was not a moving target. It was also becoming rapidly evident that the next phase of Team Working would emerge and “Storming” was predicted as the pace quickened! In conjunction with the University QAA advisor the departmental co-ordinator decided to allocate the team members to the six specific aspects of the ESR process. In the relatively small Department of Information Science at Loughborough this resulted in two or three people working together and the majority of people advising on more than one aspect. Initially Chairmen for the six-aspect group meetings were chosen. The criteria for the selection were

knowledge of the aspect and the ability to direct the questions from the reviewers to the most appropriate member of staff present in the aspect meeting. Supporting personnel were subsequently selected to complement the Chair. Members of staff were chosen to develop various protocols according to their expertise e.g. a member of staff who is a member of the University harassment panel was responsible for Aspect 4 – Student Support and Guidance. The Loughborough team also had the advantage of bringing in specialist players from the central university team, e.g. a Librarian, the Director of Information Services and a Careers Advisor. These players also began providing the specialist documents and storage of these was incorporated into the “Base Room” in the Department of Information Science. Other internal players were required, as each programme had to be represented by current students. External players were also needed, ex students and employers of department students. Lists of potential players were drawn up and selection began, however all was not simple as 1st year Undergraduates and all of the Postgraduate representatives could not be confirmed until induction day, 1 day prior to the review process in October. This caused some concern for the departmental co-ordinator, as to how we could guarantee a suitable cross section of the student body for the reviewers to interview.

Training – building the defence

The assembling of the evidence now began in earnest. Writing, collating and the gathering of evidence were mammoth tasks. Cross-referencing was essential and the need to index and store material appropriately was self-evident. All the traditional skills of the Library and Information profession were employed by team members, who had long since thought it possible to abandon such rudimentary knowledge. The evidence grew and over the weeks and months the team were conscious of the fact that each statement in the SAD required supporting evidence. Examples of supporting evidence were the documents required for each taught module. A minimum data set was created for each module, including originals of student work. This proved somewhat challenging for some final year modules, as students had already left the University, so a super sleuthing ex-

ercise was undertaken. Ex students came to the rescue very readily.

The electronic resources were also needed to reflect the SAD. The intranet had to be upgraded and wherever possible new material submitted to complement the written details.

The Web pages could not be overlooked as the team was convinced that the Reviewers would be bound to compare the Internet statements with other evidence in the departmental procedures.

To share “best practice” amongst staff, a series of teaching seminars were held throughout the months prior to the October review.

Training – practice matches

As part of the review process, the teaching process would be observed in both lectures and tutorials. Therefore, potentially every member of the teaching staff could be chosen by the review team and be observed whilst teaching. Of course, in reality, only a few members would be chosen, but the names of those to be observed would not be known until the day of observation. In order to prepare the team for the rigours of observation it was decided to hold mock teaching observations of all members of the department. Other colleagues from within the University would carry out these observations. It was generally acknowledged that this part of the review process was the most nerve racking and scary. Why? It can only be assumed that many people had not had any peer review for years and were naturally nervous, and also did not want to let the team down by giving a poor performance or not delivering a lecture as the guidelines suggested. Coaching of staff was essential, several members of the team had to be persuaded that they could “Walk the Walk and Talk the Talk”.

All members of the aspect groups were asked to meet regularly to review the evidence, to understand the evidence and to read the SAD to prepare for possible questions from the review team.

The major fixture in the practice stage was the mock review. This was held some two weeks prior to the real event. Despite all the training it went badly and morale was at an all time low. We had not performed at our best. The departmental coordinator went into over-drive and began to act as cheerleader, counsellor and advisor all rolled into one. Team spirit began to lift and we began

to believe that we could score highly in the review. All of the team members began to display high levels of stress and work went on well into the hot summer nights to try to gather more evidence, understand the evidence we had and generally rally for the main event. The “Storming” phase of team development was at its most poignant now. Shouting and commanding were the essence of communication, cajoling was over.

Performing – THE BIG MATCH

The Sunday night prior to the big match came and went. Last minute adjustments were made to the evidence, reassurance was given to staff and the firm belief that we could get 24/24 review was stated.

The Reviewer’s arrived, formal introductions made and the match was on. At the 8.30 a.m. meeting they announced who they would like to observe in teaching sessions, fortunately top players had been chosen. But we could not relax yet; this was only the beginning.

The next two days seemed to be double in length as requests for more evidence and greater clarity of evidence was requested by the reviewers. The meetings with students and employers had produced some awkward moments; the department had not always shone as it might have done, especially at the evening dinner. The aspect meetings had gone reasonable well with no unsupported or rash statements being made. The team all approached the clarification meeting on day 3 with trepidation. What would be asked of us, could we answer the questions?

It was a bun fight! Individual opinion rent the air, the co-ordinator fought desperately to bring everyone to the order. Yet several questions were proving difficult to give satisfactory answers to. The team retired to the department determined to find satisfactory answers and if necessary stay up all night to do so. We left the building at 11.00 p.m. – not a bad night’s work.

The final day came, the sun shone and the reviewers were satisfied with the extra information. We awaited their report which would ultimately be presented to The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2001) and the 4.00 p.m. meeting, when we would know our fate.

After lunch the power went off, the computers were dead; it was a localised power cut. Was this,

the team wondered, some sort of bad omen?
We reached the council chamber and listened to
the result 4/4, 4/4, 4/4, 4/4, 4/4, 4/4 ...

Yes, we had done it – 24/24!

Getting there took all our emotional energy
and tremendous intellectual effort, but the elation
was fantastic and the 24/24 stays with us ... until
the next time!

The team retired to party.

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References

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