

**SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY
UNITED KINGDOM**

**IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT AND DECISION MAKING
OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT**

1. THE UNIVERSITY

The University was formed as Sheffield Polytechnic through the merger of three Colleges of Art and Design, Commerce and Technology. Further mergers with three Teacher Training Colleges during the 1970s involved a name change, to Sheffield City Polytechnic. The Polytechnic became Sheffield Hallam University in 1992, when CNAAB was abolished and Polytechnics were granted degree awarding powers. The 1980s was a period of significant growth and Sheffield Hallam is now the seventh largest university in the UK.

The University is committed to full-time, part-time and sandwich education and also to maintaining a well-balanced portfolio of both undergraduate and postgraduate provision. There are currently approximately 17 500 full-time, sandwich and part-time students at undergraduate level, with approximately 2 800 full-time and part-time students following taught postgraduate programmes and 460 research degree students.

The University has approximately 900 teaching staff, 750 administrative staff and 650 technical or manual staff.

2. MISSION AND AIMS

Sheffield Hallam seeks to establish itself as a national professional university. The University's mission is

“to provide opportunities for the development of intellectual, professional and practical skills and qualities; to encourage national, regional and international access to higher education; and to contribute to the economic and cultural development of the region.”

The University's academic strategies are founded on the principles of quality, opportunity, flexibility and informed student choice. The recently restructured curriculum framework is based on the concept of *three cycles* of educational activity and experience (Cycle 1: CATS levels 0 and 1; Cycle 2: CATS levels 2 and 3; Cycle 3: postgraduate and post-experience), linked both to traditional higher education awards and national vocational qualifications. The majority of the University's provision at undergraduate level is accredited by professional or statutory bodies (PSBs).

In the local and regional context the strategy is one of partnership. The University's access policy is designed to widen participation in higher education through franchising, accreditation, validation and joint courses, through an extensive network of local and regional partners in further education, health authorities and elsewhere. The needs of local and regional employers are served through the provision of co-ordinated, integrated and responsive education and training, with an emphasis on vocationalism, applied research and consultancy, and continuing professional development.

The University's portfolio is dynamic, with more than 400 courses and an extensive annual programme of validation, as courses are redesigned and developed to meet changing market needs. There are also over 40 franchise links mostly with colleges in the region or overseas institutions.

To complement its named courses and programmes the University has had, since 1988, an Institution-wide CAT Scheme and a combined studies programme offering awards at all levels, from University Certificate to Masters.

3. UNIVERSITY STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

Before 1990, there were 28 academic departments grouped within 5 faculties. In 1990 there was a radical reorganisation, to establish a single tier school structure. The schools are:

- Computing and Management Sciences;
- Construction;
- Cultural Studies;
- Education;
- Engineering;
- Financial Studies and Law;
- Health and Community Studies;
- Leisure and Food Management;
- Science and Mathematics;
- Sheffield Business School;
- Urban and Regional Studies.

There are a number of Research Institutes and Centres and the establishment of a SHU Graduate School is under active consideration.

There have been also a number of reorganisations affecting central University departments in recent years, reflecting the doubling in size of the institution, growth in Cycle 3 activity and key University priorities such as delivery, efficiency, effectiveness, quality. Central departments and services now include:

- the Learning Centre (including the Learning and Teaching Institute);
- Student Services Centre;
- Academic Registrar's Department;
- Department of the University Secretary (includes Management Information Unit);
- Facilities Directorate;
- Marketing and Corporate Affairs;
- Human Resources;
- Finance.

4. MAJOR CHALLENGES

The impact of external quality assessment upon the University must be viewed in the context of the major strategic issues affecting all universities in the UK. The external environment in which the University is currently operating is dynamic, posing major challenges for the institution:

- a decline in the unit of resource;
- pressure to increase participation in HE later followed by capping of undergraduate numbers;
- possible future increase in regionality;
- possible rationalisation of institutions;
- the Dearing Review.

The University has chosen to respond to recent and anticipated future challenges by restructuring and replanning the curriculum, involving changes in delivery methods, larger class sizes, and increased reliance on distance learning and supported learning. At the same time, increasing attention is being paid to the definition and maintenance of standards, and SHU is experiencing the growing phenomenon of consumerism.

The University is also prioritising development of and growth in Cycle 3, which involves quite different issues: selectivity, growth and highly competitive external environments.

5. ACADEMIC QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The institution was at the forefront of developments in quality assurance arrangements whilst under the aegis of CNAAB, and has maintained its long-standing commitment to robust quality assurance and peer review.

Overall responsibility for academic quality and standards rests with the Academic Board. In line with the institution's policy of devolved operation wherever appropriate and feasible, and in order to ensure that the work is undertaken as economically and effectively as possible, duties are delegated by the Board to various groups and individuals. The Committee most closely involved with development of institutional policy, practice and procedures relating to quality assurance, quality assessment and standards is the Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

Academic Awards Committee and the Teaching and Learning Committee also have important roles in standards and quality improvement. Each school has a board of studies, each of which has established an academic quality, quality and standards, or courses sub-committee, to fulfil a range of quality and quality assurance responsibilities in the School.

The University's arrangements and procedures relating to quality and standards are set within the context of a quality policy. Although relatively recent this is already under review, with the intention to propose to Academic Board later this year a revised quality policy and a new standards policy, to complement the teaching and learning policy approved last year. The centrally agreed procedures are intended to provide a flexible and responsive framework within which the University may approve, monitor and review its provision, and ensure that academic standards are maintained. The overall intention is to encourage achievement and maintenance of good academic standards through high quality, effective unit/course/programme planning and delivery. Recent years have therefore seen a

marked shift in emphasis and procedures away from validation and review towards support for more effective planning. This has been characterised, for example, by abandonment of the ‘procedural guidelines’ format for many rules and requirements, replaced by a more comprehensive ‘Programme Planners Handbook’.

The main elements of the University’s quality and standards frameworks are as follows. These may be broadly defined as standard setting (S), validation (V) (testing standard setting) and evaluation (E) mechanisms.

5.1. Taught Provision Category

S	Undergraduate and Postgraduate Awards Frameworks
S	Admissions Code of Practice
S/V	Apel Procedures
S	Student Charter/Partnership in Learning
S	Standard Regulations, covering all programmes at all levels
S/V/E	External Examiner System (includes reporting via standard proforma)
S/V/E	Assessment Boards at Subject and Award level
V	Course and Programme Planning Approval
V	Validation of new and revised provision (on/offsite)
V/E	Progress Review of Existing provision (on/offsite)
V	Approval of modifications (on/offsite)
V	Accreditation of partner provision
V	Franchise approval
V	Associate College and Overseas Partner approval and Agreements
E	Annual Quality Review (AQR), incorporating the Teaching and Learning Quality Framework (TLQF)
E	Preparation for HEFCE Quality Assessment

5.2. Research Degrees Category

S/V	Regulations and Research Degrees Committee approvals procedures for Research Degrees, PhD by Published Work and Higher Doctorates
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All the above systems and procedures are devised and co-ordinated or operated at University level, with local operation of devolved elements of the framework alongside any supplementary quality assurance mechanisms devised and implemented by schools or combined studies. The University’s long-standing commitment to peer involvement and peer review is evident in the arrangements for course planning, validation and review, external examining, and preparation for quality assessment.

A significant feature of the framework is the Annual Quality Review (AQR). This includes a wide range of monitoring, evaluation and review activities, with reviews and action planning at unit, course/programme/subject, School and University level; participation of the central departments most closely associated with the academic function; ‘thematic’ overview reports relating to the student experience (drawing on a range of evidence including a student experience questionnaire); appeals, external examining, outreach, statistics, research and research degrees; and, in the Teaching and Learning Quality Framework (TLQF), a range of measures designed to support the professional performance of academic staff, including portfolios, mentoring, and teaching observation.

The breadth and strength of the AQR as a quality assurance mechanism has enabled the University to have the confidence to reduce the heavy emphasis previously placed on validation and progress review. The AQR is also beginning to be used fairly effectively to inform annual planning and it is in this area that one of the most significant impacts of HEFCE Quality Assessment is most visible, as outlined below.

Another noteworthy feature of the University's quality assurance framework is its current approach to validation, developed in the light of the experience of many years of operating in the CNAA tradition. In 1990, validation was devolved to school level and schools held an annual approval exercise, the 'Spring Event' for all their new proposals. This approach proved to be relatively costly and whilst it enabled Schools to control their own validation timetables, it was not an arrangement which promoted consistency. The University therefore reverted to a central validation system at a time when major curriculum change was occurring (the 'three cycle' approach) for two main reasons: firstly, to achieve greater consistency in terms of standard setting at the point of validation and secondly, to establish a streamlined system which would enable more resource to be devoted to programme planning, implementation and delivery. The new central system therefore features four Standing Panels which consider all proposals for approval: Undergraduate; Postgraduate; UK based outreach provision; International outreach provision. The commitment to involving external peers whenever appropriate has been maintained.

6. LINKS WITH PROFESSIONAL BODIES

Scrutiny for accreditation by professional and statutory bodies (PSBs) is a significant activity for SHU, consistent with its mission. Over 50 per cent of the University's provision is linked with or accredited by over 60 PSBs in total, so that the great majority of students following undergraduate programmes, are on programmes leading to recognition by professional bodies or exemption from professional body requirements. Whilst this is a very positive affirmation of the University's commitment to education for industry and the professions, and has substantial influence on the curriculum and operation of accredited programmes there are inevitably some tensions to be worked through and overcome. The most significant of these relates to the tension apparent in some cases between the University's curriculum and regulatory frameworks and the position taken by professional bodies on their requirements for professional accreditation.

7. HEQC ACADEMIC QUALITY AUDIT

The University was subject to HEQC Academic Quality Audit of quality assurance arrangements relating to its on campus provision in 1993, and a second audit, of its collaborative provision, in 1994. The University was pleased to have achieved very positive outcomes of both these external scrutinies, which commended its commitment to quality and to establishing effective and efficient quality assurance procedures.

The approach to both exercises, however, was deliberately low key. In each case, a small team of senior staff co-ordinated the preparation activity, which reviewed and assessed the operation of existing arrangements and co-ordinated the gathering of a range of papers to describe arrangements and illustrate their operation. The events themselves were organised by the Academic Registry. In each case, the University benefited substantially from a focused review of its own arrangements -- for example in reviewing the many and varied arrangements for receiving and acting on feedback about its provision from students, former students, and employers -- and produced its own action agenda for

improvements to its quality assurance arrangements. These agenda, in some but not all instances, overlapped with those arising from the points for consideration outlined in the Audit Reports. The University therefore took all the points for attention identified both internally and externally and developed from them a detailed action plan which has been monitored by the Academic Registry and reported upon, on a regular basis, to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and the Academic Board.

The action points were wide ranging, relating both to institutional policies which affect quality and standards and the minutiae of procedures as well as to consistency of operation across such a large, diverse and devolved institution. The exercises were seen as constructive, positive and influential and have had considerable bearing on the further development of quality assurance policy and procedures. However the vast majority of University staff were, and remain, largely unaffected by the Academic Quality Audit process itself. One major and ongoing consideration is how to ensure, in a resource-constrained climate, ownership of 'quality' by all staff and commitment to consistently rigorous operation of quality assurance procedures despite an ever growing plethora of other pressures.

HEQC's Academic Quality Audit's focus on a broad range of institutional quality assurance mechanisms includes coverage of mechanisms relating to staff, research degrees and communications, all areas which are not subject to HEFCE Quality Assessment in quite the same way. The University has also benefited considerably from the involvement of four senior staff in Academic Quality Audit elsewhere. Their experience has been extremely positive in terms of influencing quality assurance policy and practice at SHU.

Overall, however Academic Quality Audit is perceived to have been less influential on the University than its experience of quality assessment by HEFCE, which is described below. Audit was viewed by the majority of staff as an exercise focused more at institutional level than on them, as distinct from their experience of quality assessment which focuses much more sharply on the curriculum, professional practice and the student experience at subject and unit level.

8. SHU APPROACH TO HEFCE QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The University's approach to quality assessment has evolved gradually over a four year period, and will continue to do so. Initially, under the original HEFCE methodology, there was considerable scepticism about the validity of the activity and perceptions that a 'gold standard' was being inappropriately used to judge the quality of provision. In the early stages, it would also be fair to say that more attention was paid at University level to the standard of the self assessment document prepared by the Subject Group than to evaluation of provision in the subject and collaborating with the Subject Group to put in place a quality improvement strategy in the light of that evaluation.

There have now been a total of 8 quality assessments of provision at SHU, six under the original HEFCE methodology and two under the new methodology (*viz.* universal visiting, graded profile in six aspects, overall threshold judgement as to whether the quality of the provision is 'approved'), with ten more scheduled to take place by July 1998. The impact has been significant, in a variety of ways, for University policy, School and Subject Group policy and operation, the operation of central areas and University-wide systems and procedures and for individual members of academic staff.

The main University Committee involved is the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC). Initially, this committee established an Advisory Group to review quality assessment

preparation activities and advise senior management on the acceptability of draft self assessment documents. However its focus proved to be overly narrow and it was replaced by a formal Sub-Committee of AQSC which sought to provide both more systematic and proactive support for Subject Areas undergoing quality assessment, and to undertake a thorough review of the outcomes and the lessons for the University. In parallel, a core support team was established, comprising:

- The associate deans (Teaching and Learning) -- 1.5 FTE senior academic staff seconded from the School of Education to support the operation of the University's teaching and learning quality framework, and, in particular, HEFCE quality assessment, and senior staff in the registry's quality support office. The support team works closely with a project team comprising relevant senior staff from central areas such as the Learning centre, Registry, Student services centre and Corporate information systems.
- The subject co-ordinators from each subject area which has recently experienced or is scheduled to undergo quality assessment.

The Support team, through AQSC, has identified clearly defined roles and responsibilities for some of those most closely involved in quality assessment:

- unit of assessment co-ordinators (directors of school appoint to a standard person specification);
- school administrative contact;
- associate deans;
- quality support office.

This approach emphasises roles, responsibilities and support networks rather than procedures, systems and.

In practice the Project Team has proved to be highly effective, in that it provides a focus for:

- learning from experience;
- sharing good practice;
- resource efficient development activities;
- two-way communication about the requirements of the process.

Following a review of the operation of its Sub-Committees earlier this year, AQSC therefore felt sufficiently confident in the work of the Support Team, the Project Team and Subject Groups to disband the Quality Assessment and Accreditation Sub-Committee, as part of the decision to abolish all three of its sub-committees.

The quality assessment preparation process operates as follows. A co-ordinator is identified by the relevant Director of School for each unit of assessment, who takes responsibility for co-ordinating preparations for the quality assessment exercise. He or she then works with the support team to identify the range of evaluative and preparatory activities considered to be necessary for the subject area. This might include activities as diverse as

- staff development for part-time contract staff;
- staff 'away-days' and briefing sessions;

- diagnostic observation of the work of the subject area by the Associate Deans, including direct observation of teaching;
- reviews of assessment practice or the availability of student performance records;
- discussions with students to help identify weaknesses and receive constructive criticism
- reviews of quality assurance practice at local level;
- reviews of IT and library provision, using external consultants where appropriate;
- a programme of developmental peer observations of teaching;
- advice from external subject specialists;
- a ‘dry run’ or mock visit, carried out, typically, by the support team, internal staff who have been trained as quality assessors by HEFCE, and one or more external specialists, such as someone with experience as a HEFCE assessor or reporting assessor.

Whilst the Subject Group and the School are working through their action agenda, the draft self assessment is also being prepared. This is scrutinised by the associate deans and senior registry staff and constructive advice given. The Director of school is responsible for approving the final version for submission to HEFCE.

Arrangements for the visit, are undertaken collaboratively by central and School-based staff. Formal communication with the University is via the Academic Registry.

Following the visit, all HEFCE Quality Assessment reports are considered by School Boards and by AQSC, with comments from the School. AQSC highlights any notable issues for attention by Academic Board and other Schools as appropriate. AQSC also reviews all the HEFCE overview reports and considers any issues for the University arising from them.

9. IMPACT OF HEFCE QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The impact of quality assessment on management and decision-making has been profound, although the nature of that impact clearly varies at different levels and in different forms and it is hard to assess whether the impact is likely to be equally long-lasting in all areas. Some of the ways in which the impact is evident are outlined below.

The Board of Governors has taken a close interest in the outcomes of the University’s quality assessment exercises, has received new information arising from them to inform its strategic thinking, and recognises the value, both internally and externally, of positive outcomes. This interest is also clearly manifest in Academic Board, which is all too aware of the potential negative effects in the marketplace of anything other than a good outcome. Quality assessment-related issues and reports feature frequently on the agenda for School Boards. AQSC, as the committee most closely concerned with quality assurance, standards and quality, is of course heavily involved in steering the process, reviewing the outcomes and their implications, and developing future policy for debate by Academic Board.

Quality assessment has been one of several key factors influencing thinking and policy development at senior management level, and has been a major force in helping to ensure that quality and standards remain high on the institutional agenda. Long before the introduction of HEFCE Quality Assessment the University identified the need to reduce the amount of scrutiny given to course approval and quality assurance processes per se, to enable a corresponding increase in attention devoted to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. This led to:

- A major structural change, the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Institute (LTI), now part of the Learning Centre. The LTI has already conducted a series of major projects, including a self-assessment of teaching quality exercise by each School.
- The development of the teaching and learning quality framework element of the AQR, by AQSC.
- The appointment of the associate deans (teaching and learning), seconded from the School of Education.
- The most recent structural change at senior management level removed direct responsibility for quality from the portfolio of a single Assistant required to ensure that awareness of quality and standards issues permeates their work Principal: instead, each of the three Assistant Principals is. This decision illustrates the pervasive influence of quality and standards throughout the work of the University.

At School management level, quality assessment has again been influential, and directors of school have committed considerable resource to supporting thorough preparations for assessment. Directors have also been keen to support staff accepted by HEFCE to act as assessors elsewhere, recognising the benefits likely to accrue to the school as well as the resource implications of releasing senior staff for this activity. In general, key school staff have been appointed as quality assessment co-ordinators and both they and other key staff have been nominated to act as HEFCE assessors. The assessor training, and the experience of assessing provision elsewhere, has heightened awareness of teaching and learning issues for these staff, which in turn has significantly affected School decision-making.

At an operational level, the advent of quality assessment reinforced the emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning in support of the student experience and student achievement, and has in many ways acted as something of a catalyst. Staff and schools generally want to succeed and achieve good outcomes from quality assessment and, despite the inevitable scepticism and reluctance in some quarters, are on the whole prepared to invest substantial effort and enthusiasm in preparing for quality assessment and to avail themselves of all the support available from whatever source, to that end.

One of the most notable features of the impact of quality assessment has been within Subject Groups. In an institution where recent trends have been towards large programmes, modularity and a flexible approach to student choice, several participants have found that working together within the Subject Group on Quality Assessment has emphasised the value of the 'course team' and of a collegial culture, and that significant quality enhancement has resulted from concerted efforts towards a common purpose. Most staff do perceive distinct benefits arising from the preparation and assessment *e.g.*:

- greater awareness of and commitment to importance of good learning and teaching practice;
- enhanced student experience;
- injections of staff development funding;
- reorganisation within the school in the light of issues raised or highlighted;
- an improvement in the perceived status and value of the Subject Area within the University, as consequence of a good outcome;
- additional funds for teaching and learning development available from HEFCE for subject areas achieving good outcomes;

- a boost for staff morale, if a good outcome is achieved.

So far, as might be expected, the most significant effects of quality assessment appear to have been on teaching, learning, assessment and student support practice, on learning resources, on staff development activities and on quality assurance: the impact on curriculum development and organisation has not been marked. However, in an institution of this size and breadth, it does tend to take a considerable period of time for curriculum changes to be identified as necessary and then planned, proposed, approved and implemented.

In many areas at Sheffield Hallam, the old distinctions between academic and administrative responsibilities are being broken down, greater emphasis being placed on multi-skilled teams. In at least in one school, many tasks previously undertaken by academic course leaders now lie with professional Portfolio Managers. Quality assessment has lent itself particularly well to this approach, and one of the most welcome features of the process has been the way in which all staff -- academic, technical and administrative -- have worked collaboratively in support of common objectives.

Another related and equally welcome feature of the impact of quality assessment has been the way in which it has cut through many of the tensions between central services and schools which often exist within an institution which has strong commitment to devolution. School-based staff have, on the whole, warmly welcomed and made full use of all the central support available to them in relation to the quality assessment process. This has positive benefits for other work undertaken by central departments, not least in improving communication about and understanding each others' needs.

Within the Academic Registry, officer support for quality assessment has been accorded high priority. This has meant that at times during the last few years work has had to be transferred from the team concerned (*e.g.* co-ordinating contributions to external publications) or at times suspended almost entirely.

Quality assessment has been one of the key influencing agents on development of quality systems at SHU. Others include the standards debate and the need to streamline and rationalise quality assurance procedures. There is now a much sharper appreciation of the need to gather and retain information routinely as evidence for external scrutiny, for purposes of accountability. The Annual Quality Review format was changed substantially two years ago, so that the central University report and the twenty one School, Department or Theme reports which conform to the following headings:

- The six HEFCE aspects:
 - curriculum design content and organisation;
 - learning resources;
 - quality assurance and enhancement;
 - student progression and achievement;
 - student support and guidance;
 - teaching and learning and assessment.
- Standards.
- Quality.
- Research.

Although it is a challenging task to review a unit, course, programme or the work of an entire School or Department against these headings it has proved to be a remarkably effective means of highlighting for attention at institutional level those areas where institutional action should be prioritised to support the work of Schools. The University is also beginning to improve the way in which it links the outcomes of the AQR more closely to the Annual Planning process, so that it is clear how the issues arising from the annual review of quality and standards should inform resource planning.

It is interesting that quality assessment is not only influencing development of quality assurance mechanisms, but that influence on staff commitment to operating routine quality assurance is also beginning to be perceptible. There is now much wider acceptance of the need to keep basic records and have evidence to underpin assertions about quality, standards and the student experience. There is always a danger that a routine review mechanism such as the AQR can be perceived as a meaningless paper exercise: again, quality assessment seems to be having the effect, in at least some areas, of boosting staff commitment to AQR as a framework within which to locate data-gathering, critical evaluation and positive action to enhance quality.

Increasing constraints on funding and concern for quality, have led to a consequent increase in concern for accountability and value for money at both government and institutional level. Good quality information, to provide evidence for purposes of accountability and external quality scrutiny and to support internal decision-making, is therefore of paramount importance. However an area of considerable difficulty for SHU, highlighted by the demands of quality assessment, has been the facility with which the University's computerised student record is able to generate accurate student enrolment and performance data. There is also a clearly evident tension between a unit based curriculum and records of achievement at unit level, which underpin a commitment to student choice and flexible modes of study, and the HEFCE Quality Assessment requirement for course-based information. The development and phased implementation of the University's new Student Management System (SMS) has been a top University priority for the last two or three years but continuing problems and delays have meant that we have experienced significant difficulties in presenting comprehensive and accurate statistical information for quality assessment. In some cases, it has even been necessary to resort to manual production of the information. This has served to underline and reinforce for the University the critical importance of maintaining the priority accorded to SMS.

As the University's experience of working through evaluations and preparations for quality assessment in a large number of areas grows, a reasonably clear picture is beginning to emerge about the value of the entire process as an agent for change. Examples of this which can be cited include:

- the influence on perceptions within Facilities Directorate about what constitutes good accommodation suited to the specified aims and objectives of teaching and learning strategies;
- the way in which deliberations and decisions within the Estate Strategy Group have been influenced by the need to consider how the quality assessment schedule should influence the planned refurbishment and relocation programme;
- the extent to which quality assessment support related activities now feature within staff development programmes.

There is a widespread view at all levels, however, that whilst there are many forces and pressures for change, of which quality assessment is just one, the identification of the need for change during the quality assessment preparation process or in the light of the judgement delivered by the external assessors, is the factor which forces change more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

Amongst those who have been most closely associated with quality assessment, it is possible to draw distinctions between their differing perceptions as to its impact. Senior Managers tend to be clear that quality assessment is one extremely influential factor amongst many, for institutional decision making. Senior Managers at School level have strong views about the value of good outcomes from this kind of external peer review exercise, some rating it as more worthwhile and valid than scrutiny by internal peers without specialist subject expertise. Many academic staff within Schools find the whole process extremely daunting as well as challenging and developmental. The effect of a positive outcome on morale is good, at least in the short term: a negative outcome, however, can be extremely damaging.

10. CONCERNS, ISSUES AND RESERVATIONS

There are also, of course, perceived drawbacks and disadvantages arising from quality assessment. Whilst on the whole there is fairly general acceptance that the process is a valid one some doubts have been expressed about its reliability, given the intense pressure on assessors during the actual visit and the small peer group size in some Subject Areas. Another fairly common view is that whilst the process may well be valid and have some value, the extent to which it offers value for money, or a sufficiently significant return for the effort invested both internally and across the sector, is less certain. The fact that there is no linkage between HEFCE funding and the outcomes of HEFCE Quality Assessment, in direct contrast to HEFCE Research Assessment serves to reinforce negative perceptions about the value of quality assessment

There are differing views about the value of quality assessment at this particular time. Some staff welcome it as a means of demonstrating and recognising the importance of good teaching and learning practice when the emphasis is all too often, as they see it, on success measured in terms of the HEFCE Research Assessment Exercise criteria. For SHU, as for other UK Universities, there has been a recent and unhelpful convergence of activity leading up to the HEFCE RAE 1996, a heavy schedule of HEFCE Quality Assessment, and activities aimed at securing the desired position in the sector for the University, following the Dearing Review. At this time, therefore, difficult decisions about how staff time should be spent are inevitable, with tensions between commitments to improving teaching quality and the student experience within reducing resources and increasing high quality research and publications within an evermore competitive and selective sector. These decisions are, however, influenced by the widespread view that although a good outcome at quality assessment is valuable, it is less influential both internally and externally than a high rating in the RAE.

To date, appointment and promotion policy have not been affected by quality assessment. It is not a factor as such in professional appointments, although research activity often is. The challenge for the University is to ensure that University policy, practice and incentive and reward structures are developed in a way which demonstrates that staff contributions to undergraduate teaching and course management, and to research and postgraduate activity, are equally valued and rewarded.

There is also the view that as the resource noose tightens ever further, institutions will simply not be able to afford to resource both internal- and externally-driven quality systems and that if they must, it will be at the expense of real quality and the student experience.

What is by no means clear at this stage is the extent to which prospective students and employers recognise and value quality assessment outcomes at Subject Area level (as distinct from, say, professional body accreditation of a course), other than if an unsatisfactory rating is awarded. Nevertheless, for marketing purposes a report commending the Subject Area within which a course or programme is located is clearly more useful than one which is highly critical or heavily qualified.

There is also some cynicism amongst staff about how long the beneficial effects of preparation for quality assessment, the exercise itself and the outcome are likely to last, and fears that they are unlikely to survive the whole length of the new Quality Agency's intended 8 year cycle. It is also by no means clear whether the overall long term effect on the quality of teaching and learning is positive or otherwise.

11. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE: SINGLE QUALITY AGENCY

Revision of the sector-wide external arrangements for quality assessment and academic quality audit is imminent, under the auspices of the proposed new single Quality Agency. At SHU there is considerable relief that change is imminent, because there has been a substantial blight on the redevelopment of internal systems, pending firm announcements about the nature of changes to external systems.

Until precise details of the new external arrangements are known it would be imprudent to change radically the University's internal quality assurance systems. The lack of clarity about the future role of PSBs in relation to the work of the Quality Agency is particularly difficult for SHU, given the importance of professional body accreditation of the majority of the portfolio. However, development work is proceeding cautiously. An 8 year external quality assessment at subject/programme level is likely: it might therefore be sensible to move from 6 to 8 years for progress reviews. An 8 yearly review of the broad range of quality assurance arrangements may be included: we should therefore include a means of taking an overview of all of these arrangements on a broader basis than is currently achieved. A Quality Assurance Plan for the institution for the 8 year period will need to be proposed to the Quality Agency: considerable work will therefore have to be devoted to consulting with Schools and formulating, for the first time, a co-ordinated schedule of internal quality assurance and enhancement activities, professional body scrutiny/reapproval, and external Quality Agency reviews.

12. CONCLUSIONS

External peer review is pervasive and influential. The most notable effects of Professional Body intervention are at the curriculum level: HEQC Academic Quality Audit is most influential at institutional and School quality assurance system level. HEFCE Quality Assessment is a pervasive influence at all levels and acts as an important agent for change, particularly in relation to academic practice. Its outcomes are considered at all levels and influence the University culture generally as well as thinking on institutional policy and strategy, School operation and curriculum development. It has not affected the University mission, and although quality assessment considerations and

outcomes have been taken into account in institutional decision-making at the highest levels, they have not changed the nature of the decisions which need to be taken, nor have they been appreciably influential on strategic decisions about the nature of the University and its portfolio. It has been more influential on academic practice, the organisation of academic support services, and resource allocation within the devolved budgets of schools and departments.

This is probably predictable, given that quality assessment takes place in the context of the subject providers' aims and objectives, which map into the institutional mission. There are also a number of significant limitations on the influence which an institution can permit quality assessment to have on institutional decision-making. Any further growth must be achieved within existing resources and there is no increased funding for provision judged to be of high quality. External quality assessment is only concerned with identifying whether the quality threshold has been achieved. As yet, the marketing value of good quality assessment outcomes remains unclear. In somewhat stark contrast, sector wide, a good quality profile in postgraduate and research activity is of the utmost importance, and is linked to funding.

The University must therefore aim to achieve an appropriate balance, allowing quality assessment considerations to continue to inform but not predominate in institutional management and decision-making, and ensuring that appropriate and affordable levels of resource are devoted to learning, teaching and research.