



With the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union

**„Identifying Barriers in Promoting the European Standards and Guidelines
for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

IBAR

Agreement number – 2010 – 4663/001 - 001

WP8
Quality and Management/Governance
National study – United Kingdom
2012

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

IBAR Project

Work-Package 8

Quality and Governance – survey of institutions UK

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This report presents data from four UK higher education institutions, three from England and one from Scotland, about the management of their internal quality assurance systems as they relate to university governance. The report was produced between February and April 2012 by the IBAR project team at the University of Strathclyde and Durham University

The report focuses on the policy and procedures for managing the governance of education quality in UK higher education. It draws on data from four UK institutions and also examines the broader higher education policy and national quality management environment that influences institutional practice in this area.

This report will form part of the data informing a synthesis report for this work-package of the IBAR project that will make recommendations about future guidelines on governance in the context of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area Part 1 (ESG1).

Currently, ESG1 includes the following standards, which, although not explicitly describing governance arrangements, describe much of the territory and activities governed by university governance structures and processes:

1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance

Standard:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture that recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality.

The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Guidelines:

Formal policies and procedures provide a framework within which higher education institutions can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. They also help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy. Policies contain the statements of intentions and the principal means by which these will be achieved. Procedural guidance can give more detailed information about the ways in which the policy is implemented and provides a useful reference point for those who need to know about the practical aspects of carrying out the procedures.

The policy statement is expected to include:

- the relationship between teaching and research in the institution
- the institution's strategy for quality and standards
- the organisation of the quality assurance system
- the responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties and other

organisational units and individuals

- for the assurance of quality
- the involvement of students in quality assurance
- the ways in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised.

The realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes; and that there is full, timely and tangible recognition of the contribution to its work by those of its staff who demonstrate particular excellence, expertise and dedication. All higher education institutions should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students.

1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards Standard:

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

Guidelines:

The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.

The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include:

- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content
- specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full time, part-time, distance-learning, e-learning)
- and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional)
- availability of appropriate learning resources
- formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme
- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students
- regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members)
- regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations
- participation of students in quality assurance activities.

1. National policy context

Much of the current structure of university governance in the UK can be attributed to the changes across the sector in the wake of the 1985 Jarratt report on higher

education¹. The Jarratt report was commissioned by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), but can be understood as a response to considerable pressure from the government under the Conservative government leadership of Margaret Thatcher. In line with similar reforms directed at other parts of the public sector, Jarratt advocated a new managerial model of decision-making and accountability which re-conceptualised universities as corporations under the leadership not of collegiate bodies of academics, but under a chief executive and a managerial board. The new universities created after 1992, when the UK's two-tier system of higher education was abolished, have governance structures that were established from the beginning in line with the recommendations of the Jarratt Report, which were adopted as part of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Other, older institutions have taken longer to respond to the pressures of a changing legislative and fiscal environment, but the trend has been overwhelmingly towards increasingly corporate models of governance.

A further report on higher education² (Dearing, 1997) noted that there was still considerable diversity in governance arrangements at universities, which reflected their different histories and that this diversity should be "respected". However, Dearing did recommend that all institutions must seek to increase clarity and transparency in governance and, in the light of coming changes in the sector, to review their governance activities. Of concern to Dearing was the size of many governing bodies, which he felt were too large to support effective decision-making, and a lack of clarity about the functions, performance and effectiveness of some governing bodies

Dearing recommended that a code of practice be adopted across the sector that set out principles for the composition, conduct, procedures and review of governing bodies. A subsequent review of university governance undertaken by the Committee of University Chairmen (CUC) in 2000 showed that at least 96% of UK universities had reviewed their legal structures or carried out effectiveness reviews of their governing bodies in response to Dearing; every university had "unambiguously" confirmed that its governing body has ultimate authority for the governance of the university and many universities had reduced the numbers of members of their governing bodies.

In line with the Dearing recommendations, the CUC produced a Governance Code of Practice (2004)³ that was revised in 2009. The Code of Practice sets out areas of responsibility for Governing Bodies, sets expectations about proper conduct, offers guidance on the management of common issues including dealing with conflicts of interest and provides guidance on the selection and rotation of membership.

As part of the same drive to rationalise higher education management, definitions of institutional autonomy have changed considerably. Changes in the ways in which

1 Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities (Chairman Sir Alex Jarratt). Report. London CVCP, 1985.

2 National Committee for Enquiry into Higher Education (Chairman Sir Roan Dearing). Report. London CVCP, 1997. Available from: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

3 CUC Guide for Members of Higher Education Governing Bodies in the UK. Full text available from: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_14/

public money is distributed to higher education institutions after the Dearing Report (1997) have increased the leverage of ministers to direct the affairs of universities through the funding councils (HEFCE in England, HEFCW in Wales and SFC in Scotland). The Funding Councils serve as one of the key sources of monitoring of HEI's and to a great extent steer many aspects of university mission and working practices through the operation of the Research Assessment Exercise (recently re-named the Research Excellence Framework⁴) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA and QAA Scotland). These mechanisms have considerably curtailed universities' freedom to determine their own academic standards and to freely allocate resources. University autonomy has become "conditional" in the sense that reliance on public money means that universities must align their internal decision-making to nationally-determined frameworks and to the annual ministerial steering that is communicated via the higher education funding councils. Universities must, for example, submit their research plans to the funding councils and must participate in reviews of educational quality conducted by the QAA.

More recently, pressure on universities to make an active and measurable contribution to national economies has created a third central activity: that of knowledge exchange and an increasingly blurred boundary between universities and industry. The same policy steer has focused attention on the relationship between higher education study and future employability. The introduction of undergraduate student fees in England and Wales further intensified debate about the nature and purposes of higher education. The changing relationship between universities and the national economy was codified in the 2003 Lambert Review⁵ of Business-University Collaboration, which devoted a chapter to recommendations for further reform of university governance. Lambert praises small executive management teams that are able, in his view, to take quick decisions and avoid the bureaucracy and conservatism of larger, more traditionally academic committees or academic boards. Lambert recommended simplification of reporting lines, appointment of professional managerial staff to head core management functions, a more strategic approach to human resource management and rationalisation of committee structures. An annex to the report recommended a draft code of governance that could be adopted across the whole higher education sector. Among a number of other recommendations, this draft code of governance is explicit about the changing nature of the role of University Vice-Chancellor (in Scotland, Principal) as "Chief Executive" of the institution.

A number of high-profile "failures" of university governance in recent years have led to criticism and concern about this increasingly executive and "business-like" model of university management. Various and widely-reported problems at Leeds Metropolitan University, London City University, Brunel University and Liverpool University have been perceived by some commentators as a product of the disproportionate power of some Vice-Chancellors who have been able to pursue activities or make decisions that have not been properly scrutinised by their governing bodies or, in some cases, as a result of breakdowns in trust between Vice-Chancellors and lay members of governing bodies who may be keen to pursue their own interests.

4 HEFCE Research Excellence Framework. See: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/>

5 Richard Lambert 2003 HMSO. Full text available from: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/lambert_review_final_450.pdf

Some commentators have been highly critical of the model of small governing bodies that include a majority of external members, questioning the ability of governors to properly understand the context and special needs of higher education and questioning the extent to which “distant” lay members can be properly representative of institutional stakeholders (see Shattock⁶, ⁷ and Palfreyman⁸).

A recent paper by Malcolm Gillies (2011)⁹, formerly Vice-Chancellor of London City University and currently Vice-Chancellor of London Metropolitan University argues that even the 2009 Code of Practice is rapidly becoming out of date as the higher education sector experiences rapid change. The implications of the 2010 Browne Report¹⁰ on Higher Education, which has dramatically changed the ways in which undergraduate programmes and places are funded in England and Wales are only just starting to be felt by UK institutions. The most likely changes precipitated by Browne include greater competition between institutions, particularly those in the “middle” who are most likely to struggle to recruit enough students to maintain a full portfolio of courses; the increased likelihood of “super-universities” who are able to capitalise on the changing policy of caps on student numbers to recruit more students; and the possibility of many more private providers entering the UK higher education market. Higher student fees (up to £9000 per year for undergraduates in England and Wales) have already begun to change the relationship between student and institution and focused attention on the transactional nature of higher education. Whilst many commentators are concerned about the implications of simplistically equating “students” with “customers”, many institutions are explicitly re-structuring their management and governance activities to focus more directly on “the student experience” and the distinctiveness (and therefore “marketability”) of their educational offerings.

One other important trend in UK higher education is the impact of devolution. Although the effects on higher education in Northern Ireland have been minimal (partly because of the small number of universities in the region) there is increasing divergence in higher education policy in Scotland, which has around 20 HEIs. Scotland has a distinctive education system, has not introduced undergraduate tuition fees and has pursued a divergent form of quality assurance/enhancement through its own national agency (QAA Scotland). A recent review of governance of HEIs in Scotland¹¹ (February 2012) has (unlike in England and Wales) re-focused attention on

6 Shattock M (2002) “Re-balancing modern concepts of university governance”, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 2002, Vol. 56 (3) 235-244

7 Shattock M. (2006) *Managing Good Governance in Higher Education*, Buckingham. Open University Press

8 Farrington & Palfreyman, (2006), *The Law of Higher Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

9 Gillies, M (2011) University Governance: Questions for a New Era. Full text available from: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/files/UniversityGovernance.pdf>

10 Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (Chairman Lord Browne). *Securing a sustainable future for higher education*. Full text available from: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf>

11 Report of the Review of Higher Education Governance in Scotland. Full text available from: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/02/3646>

the ability of governance arrangements to protect academic freedom and to ensure that governing bodies properly represent student and academic needs and are equipped with the skills to do so. Amongst the recommendations made by the report is the drafting of a distinctively Scottish code of practice on governance to be commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council and the establishment of a Scottish Research Centre for Higher Education which could recommend further change, thus potentially paving the way for greater divergence between the Scottish sector and other parts of the UK.

Recent literature has also questioned the current ability of governance arrangements to keep pace with the changing nature of university activities, with the changing needs of stakeholders and with the increasing diversification of university workforces. Whitchurch and Gordon (2011)¹² consider the extent to which the increasing numbers of university practitioners in areas such as health or social care and the needs of university professionals in non-traditional roles (for example, to support widening participation, e-learning, and business partnerships) are served by current governance structures and practices. As the nature of UK universities changes and the boundaries between universities, industry and other areas of society shifts, there are real questions about the need for governance arrangements that might better reflect changed realities.

2. Methodology

Institutions surveyed

The four institutions selected represent a sample of the variant types of higher education institution in the UK. After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, polytechnics in the UK achieved degree-awarding status and became universities. Our sample was selected to demonstrate the diversity of higher education in the UK and to ensure that the data collected offered a rich picture of practice across the sector.

Our sample includes:

University A is a research-intensive, collegiate institution, which dates from the early 19th century. The University has around 11000 undergraduate and 5000 postgraduate students and its main functions are divided between academic departments, which undertake research and provide teaching to students, and a number of colleges, which are responsible for the domestic and pastoral needs of students, researchers and some academic staff. University A features prominently in UK and QS university rankings and is a member of British and international groupings of research-intensive universities. It is consistently rated as one of the top universities in the UK.

University B was a former polytechnic that opted to become a university under the powers of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Subsequent mergers with colleges in the region added Nursing and Midwifery to the academic profile and three smaller campuses. The University has around 16000 students spread across five

12 Whitchurch, C. and Gordon, G. (2011) 'Some Implications of a Diversifying Workforce for Governance and Management', *Tertiary Education and Management* 17(1), 65-77

campuses. It also offers foundation awards in conjunction with partner further education colleges. Some 5000 students study in Europe and Asia for University B awards. There is a strong commitment to employment-related provision.

University C dates from the late nineteenth century. It became an independent institution in the 1960s. Further academic diversification occurred through growth and, in the 1990s, via merger with higher education colleges. Currently it has some 17000 students and a strong professional orientation. Distance learning students account for almost 20 per cent of the student enrolment. University C has some world-renowned areas of research excellence and has a growing reputation for the quality of its student education.

University D is one of the newer universities in the UK, progressing from the status of a higher education college, to that of a University College and then full university status in recent decades. Mergers during that phase also diversified the academic profile. It has around 8000 undergraduate students, of which 1300 are studying for further education qualifications. Almost half of the student population comprises mature students.

Conducting the research

Formal definitions of “governance” from a national policy perspective have tended to focus primarily on the executive body of the university and the formal and structural terms of its relationship with the institution through committees or equivalent channels. Much of the literature and many of the national codes of practice or other guidelines on university governance are directed therefore towards an examination of the powers and conduct of the executive body.

We have chosen to extend this narrow definition of governance to include opportunities to contribute to decision-making about, and management of, student education quality at multiple levels within institutions to best reflect the context of ESG1. Relevant governance structures may therefore include not just the executive body, but also other forums through which education policy and practice is determined and managed including committees and teams at different levels of the university.

Data collection for WP8 was conducted in four ways: firstly, as a desk study, using documents publicly available on the websites of the four institutions to uncover policies and information about institutional activities related to student assessment. During this first phase of data collection, a number of key individuals at each institution with particular responsibility for/or interest in the governance of educational quality were identified. These included senior managers at institutional level (for example, Directors of Student Experience, Head of Student Registry, Directors of Quality); senior academics with responsibility for overseeing decision-making processes at School/Faculty level (for example, Deans of Faculty, School Directors of Quality); academic staff with responsibility for programme design and monitoring; and students (in particular Student Presidents and sabbatical officers of the Students Union or members of the Student Council). In all, 64 university representatives were approached to participate in this study, 16 from each institution.

A second phase of data collection involved the distribution of a short questionnaire to the aforementioned categories of respondents in each institution.

The third phase of data collection comprised focus groups and semi-structured telephone interviews with those individuals identified in phase one of the data collection who were available to speak to the team.

A final phase of data collection comprised desk-based data collection to inform a consideration of the sectoral and/or national policy context of access to higher education in the UK.

One highly relevant finding from the earliest stage of the research for this work-package is the extent to which the institutions participating in the project are experiencing considerable churn in senior management positions and in governance structures and processes. For some universities, the question of governance and the culture of decision-making in the institution is a sensitive issue. One paradox of this sensitivity is that it was sometimes easier for the project team to secure responses from senior management, who were often keen to share their vision for their university, than to elicit responses from colleagues lower down in the institution who may feel that they are suffering from the effects of large-scale organisational change. Some of the senior managers who participated in this study were very new to the universities they represent and so were unable to provide the team with a long-term view of organisational culture or practices.

3. Responses to the research questions

1. Policy context

What national legislation or frameworks influence governance structures and processes at university level?

Have any recent changes (in the last 5 years) in legislation or frameworks resulted in changes in governance activities at your university?

Participants identified the influence on the university sector of a variety of government reviews and reports, some which have made direct recommendations about changes to university governance (for example, the 2003 Lambert Review) and others (for example, the 2010 Browne Review) which have not examined university governance directly, but have made recommendations for significant changes in the sector which inevitably impact on the ways in which universities make decisions and on which issues are prioritised.

The 2004 and 2009 CUC Code of Practice on University Governance and the rules laid down by HEFCE/SFC in their terms and conditions for payment of core funding grants were both cited by senior managers as important influences on the design, composition and conduct of university governing bodies. Annual ministerial letters to the UK funding councils for higher education are recognised as a significant influence

on which issues are prioritised in university decision-making and on the speed of decision-making.

A majority of participants cited the QAA's code of practice as a key document in the design of the governance of quality at lower levels of the institution (for example, quality arrangements at School/Faculty/Department level), although many participants also noted that other external influences are becoming increasingly important drivers of practice, including the National Student Survey¹³ and the HEFCE/HESA Key Information Sets (KIS)¹⁴.

A number of participants also cited changes in national legislation in areas including health and safety, equality and diversity, disability and immigration (i.e. UK Border Agency restrictions on the rights of overseas students to remain in the UK which has had an impact on student recruitment) which have all had an impact on governing structures at multiple levels within institutions and affect how universities shape reports from working groups and action groups. Funding models and initiatives are also seen to drive university behaviours in powerful ways (for example, in setting student numbers or encouraging widening access).

Even though all the institutions surveyed are influenced by the same sector-wide steering, the relatively high levels of autonomy enjoyed by UK universities and the diversity of university missions means that the interpretation and implementation of the outcomes of government reviews differs. In England and Wales, the impact(s) of the 2010 Browne Report on higher education funding are only just starting to be fully felt, but many universities have already responded by offering enhanced opportunities for students to engage in governance activities. This might be seen as particularly important for institutions who are broadly "recruiting" universities, rather than those who are able to select from a larger pool of applicants.

For at least two of the universities participating in this study, changes in the policy environment mean that the scope and nature of university activities is changing rapidly. For example, at University B, there is recognition that the "standard" model of undergraduate provision is unlikely to bring enough income into the institution. The university is undertaking a full portfolio review of existing programmes to ensure that educational offerings are attractive to potential students and to other stakeholders including employers. Work is also underway to strengthen partnerships with other providers, including local colleges and industry and to significantly grow the number of students gaining awards through the university by these routes. Participants noted that partnerships inevitably create governance challenges. This may be particularly true of overseas collaborations, which may suffer from cultural or political differences, but it can also be true of local partners.

One difficulty or barrier identified by a number of participants is the multiplicity of external ideas, policies, targets and performance measures that "crowd" the UK higher education sector and create "unhelpful complexity". Some participants noted the "dichotomy" between policy changes that create a freer marketplace for universities

13 For more information, see: <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>

14 For more information, see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm>

and a perceived environment of low trust that imposes more and more measurement and scrutiny. One participant noted that: “we are operating with one or both hands tied behind our backs”.

Senior managers at University D reflected on the challenges of managing opposing drivers to establishing a quality culture. Should the university internationalise at all costs? Should the university pursue riskier strategies? Should the university pull in students at all costs? The university needs to maintain an appetite for risk while achieving quality. There is always a tension between the commercial impetus and the rules. In the current climate the institution has to hunt for new markets: this is riskier, and puts a strain on the quality cultures.

Whilst many participants in this study agreed that external agendas set by government have had a major effect in changing the focus and shape of governance structures within their universities, others were keen to assert the autonomy of their institution in determining and managing governance arrangements. Arguably, the freedom of UK universities to interpret and implement government directives according to local need is the only true remaining freedom within what can be seen as a strongly steered environment. Some senior respondents to this study with a responsibility for policy development noted that the QAA codes of practice constitute “the closest thing to legislation”. Although the guidelines published by the QAA are not statutory, there is a feeling that institutions would need to demonstrate very good reasons for any significant divergence from the QAA model.

Typical structural responses to external drivers have included simplification and rationalisation of committee structures, membership and roles. For example, University D has changed its committee structure in the last 5 years and now has only three main committees – Student Experience, Academic Quality and Standards Committee, and the Research Committee. The same committee structure is also used at School level, and School committees report to their institutional counterparts. Similar rationalisations have taken place at the other institutions participating in this study. Respondents noted a number of practical drivers for these kinds of structural changes: a simplified committee structure focuses attention on the most important issues; is likely to reduce bureaucracy and expense; makes it easier to manage lines of accountability (for example, School/Faculty-based committees report directly to their institution-wide counterparts); and is more likely to deliver consistency in the student experience (for example, at Universities A & B, each School/Faculty now has a consistent management structure with the same job titles and same job roles and descriptions, making it much easier to determine areas of responsibility for implementation of university strategy). At University C, changes to the timing of reporting on educational matters from Schools/Faculties to the centre have been designed to encourage speedier (and more immediately visible) responses to issues of concern raised by students, external examiners or staff.

Politically, a key driver of this type of rationalisation is the increased availability of data on the student experience, which has created multiple opportunities for current and potential students to compare practices in different Schools/Faculties and in different universities. Formal channels like the National Union of Students are supplemented by informal information-sharing channels (for example, Facebook or Twitter).

A more streamlined committee and reporting structure could be seen as a way of controlling or limiting the voices heard across the institution. It is clear that structural changes are explicitly intended to help universities to monitor more readily the implementation of university-wide policies at local level. The extent to which a more streamlined structure enables local messages to pass more quickly to senior management depends to some extent on institutional culture.

2. Cultures of governance

How would you describe the decision-making culture in the university? Bottom-up? Top-down?

To what extent does the central administration/senior management initiate and drive change?

In what ways do you think that governance structures influence the quality culture at your university?

What are the main strengths and weaknesses in the quality culture at your university?

One predictable finding from this study is the high levels of change (described as “seismic” by one interviewee) in the participating universities. Two of the institutions under study (University B and University D) have very recently initiated significant changes to their senior management teams and to the structure of Schools/Faculties, which has resulted in considerable churn in management personnel and roles. University C has undergone a comprehensive re-structure within the last three years.

Many participants associated re-structuring and changes in management with a change in the culture of decision-making. A change in senior management is associated with a change in strategic priorities or direction and in Universities A, B and D “Top-down. This has been a matter of personality at the top with oversight for these matters”. There is widespread agreement that this has led to a greater emphasis on “top-down” decision-making as new strategic objectives are pursued. This is not necessarily perceived as a negative consequence of re-organisation: some participants described the need for change in one institution that had become “moribund” and was no longer able to respond effectively to a rapidly changing environment, partly because so much decision-making was devolved to Schools or Faculties and there was little or no university-wide identity or strategy.

“Speed is of the essence. Quick decisions have to be made and strategy can change overnight.”

Senior Managers focus group, University D

Many participants noted the speed of change required by external drivers including, for example, the OFFA agreements. There is a perception that universities no longer have the luxury of long planning periods or consultations and recognition that institutions have to act quickly to respond to new national policy and other environmental factors. To some extent, this means that many participants in this study were relatively relaxed about perceived shifts in decision-making from the wider academic community to a smaller executive team. However, both senior managers and academic staff at lower levels of the institution noted the importance of gaining widespread support for change in order to secure effective implementation. Many

respondents reported dissatisfaction with consultation opportunities: typical comments being “there is a lot of rhetoric about consultation, but you always feel that they have already made the decision and they don’t take anyone else’s views into account” and “all L & T policy and quality control decisions are made after consultation with departments. However, individual academics do not participate very robustly in the consultation exercises, and some of those (but by no means most) involved in managing the consultation do not appear to care very much about whether or not the consultation is robust”. A number of respondents described senior management as “them” and the rest of the university community as “us”. This was especially true at University B, which has recently gained a large number of new senior managers and a new Vice-Chancellor. Although there is support for many of the changes being implemented, there is also a feeling amongst some respondents that the new management team does not have any collective organisational memory or knowledge of previous good practice and therefore risks dismantling previously successful structures or activities.

At University B, the pace of change has also been challenging for staff charged with implementing a number of transformational strategies simultaneously. Whilst staff are often sympathetic to the aims of individual strategies, too many changes at once “just looks like a tsunami coming your way”. The consequence for some middle managers at School/Faculty level is coping with over-loaded and stressed staff.

The picture for many academic staff managing decision-making about educational quality at lower levels of the institution is much more mixed. At University C and University D, re-structuring has been designed in part to encourage greater opportunities for devolved decision-making at school level and “on the ground” by academic staff at programme level. One participant described how “day to day operational decisions about learning and teaching is a bottom-up approach, informed by the interplay between tutors, students, external stakeholders, new research and new ways of learning”, contrasting this with the “big strategic decisions” which are made at a higher level.

At a number of institutions, one aim of re-structuring governance mechanisms including committees, working groups and management roles has been to strengthen the relationship between institution-wide strategic objectives and the staff in Schools/Faculties who will be asked to implement those objectives. Typical changes include enhanced representation for School/Faculty managers on key university committees (e.g. Learning and Teaching or Quality Committees), rationalisation of job descriptions (so that, for example, the role of Head of Quality is the same in each School/Faculty) and changes in the timing and format of reporting from Schools/Faculties to the Centre on quality implementation and related issues.

At University C, which has initiated some of these changes, senior managers discussed the “helpful tension” between collective oversight and local autonomy that is a useful component of their quality culture. Getting the balance between necessary institution-wide strategic direction and effective devolved implementation that is “owned” at local level is a key organisational challenge.

Another shift in organisational influence was apparent throughout this study. Student respondents (including Student Presidents, Sabbatical Officers and members of Student Councils) described their enhanced status at all levels of University governance. Participants at University C described their practice as “ahead of the curve” in this respect, because the institution has already raised the number of student representatives on its governing body to three. However, the other universities participating in this study have also moved to strengthen student representation at the highest levels of governance and at all other levels of institutional decision-making.

Student officers at University B described their perception of an institution in which student views are taken very seriously, in which there is a real sense of students being given every opportunity to contribute to university strategy and in which opportunities for regular dialogue between students and senior management, including the Vice-Chancellor, were readily available. Almost all of the participants in this study described the student-centered nature of university governance and quality processes as a key strength of their institutions, reflecting a generalised shift in UK higher education. It is interesting to note that student officers, student council members, university managers and academic staff were all very likely to agree that students are a core part of university decision-making.

4. Institutional governance and Quality Assurance (ESG Part 1)

How does institutional governance relate to quality assurance (ESG standard 1.1)?

To what extent does institutional governance take into account quality assurance of study programmes in particular with respect to:

Development and publication of learning outcomes (ESG standard 1.2)?

Curriculum and programme design content; modes of delivery and institutional profile (ESG standard 1.2)?

Availability of appropriate learning resources and student support (ESG standards 1.2 and 1.5)?

Periodic reviews of programmes including feedback from employers and alumni (ESG standard 1.2)?

What is done well? What would you like to improve? What barriers do you recognise?

There is a universal recognition across all the institutions surveyed that responsibility for quality should be primarily focused at the level at which teaching is experienced by students. This extract from University C's Quality Framework illustrates a set of aspirations, which help to define the territory in which quality is managed across sub-units of the university:

"A key principle of the Quality Assurance Framework is that the primary determinant of teaching quality is the relationship between those delivering and supporting teaching and the student. In accord with this, its policies and processes aim to:

- support regular reflective practice on the part of staff, teaching teams and academic managers

- promote active involvement of students and their representatives, including the students' association
- create a culture of continuous improvement and enhancement
- encompass the requirements of professional statutory bodies, when appropriate
- facilitate communication of needs and priorities both from the 'bottom up' and from the 'top down'"

Accordingly, responsibility for the design of quality assurance processes lies with the Schools of University C, with the expectation that responsibility for much of the work will be assigned to module leaders or programme teams who have the expertise to make decisions appropriate to teaching within cognate subject areas.

In much the same way as institutions have autonomous responsibility for the design and implementation of their quality systems within the context of a national framework administered by QAA, devolved sub-units at universities decide on the detail of implementation within the framework of institutionally agreed frameworks. This approach offers the potential for the development of useful local variation within the context of an overall university strategy and distinctive style of provision.

Just as the national agency provides detailed frameworks to inform institutional practice which is monitored via periodic review, each institution surveyed provides a considerable amount of guidance to its devolved sub-units. Standardisation of practice across the institution may be encouraged by the use of standard forms to support module or programme approval, standard student feedback surveys in use across the whole university etc.

Although all of the institutions surveyed stress the importance of locating responsibility for quality assurance at local level (i.e. within schools, faculties and departments) each of them also maintain a central quality management unit which works across the whole institution to manage quality processes. Commonly, these processes include maintaining a single register of modules and programmes, managing the work of relevant committees and decision-making bodies and managing institution-wide student representation activities, collection of data from students (e.g. annual student surveys) and supporting processes associated with external scrutiny.

Development and publication of learning outcomes (ESG standard 1.2)?

Curriculum and programme design content; modes of delivery and institutional profile (ESG standard 1.2)?

Although curriculum design and development of learning outcomes is devolved to the academic staff members responsible for the delivery of modules/programmes, there is an increasing trend at the participating institutions towards the adoption of strategic and institution-wide principles, guidelines or principles that should be reflected in the design of modules/programmes and learning outcomes at local level.

For example, University B has adopted a seven-point typology of awards derived from the level descriptors from the FHEQ¹⁵. The purpose of this university-wide typology is to assist programme designers “to express at an appropriate level, the challenges of their own fields of study”. Each institutional outcome (“knowledge and

¹⁵ QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQ08.pdf>

understanding”, “learning”, “enquiry”, “analysis”, “problem-solving”, “communication”, “application” and “reflection”) is described at FHEQ levels four to six for undergraduate programmes and at level seven for masters-level study.

For example, at level 6: “analysis”, students should be able to:

“describe and comment upon current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship and critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgments.”

The extent to which each academic programme (and the modules which comprise the programme) adhere to this typology is determined as part of the standard validation process for new modules and programmes.

At University B an additional set of institution-wide outcomes that inform curriculum design is also in place. These are described as “looser”, “top level” attributes that are intended to define the particular qualities of a graduate from this institution. In developing these outcomes, the university has been influenced by work in Australia to describe and nurture distinctive “graduate attributes”, or the qualities, skills and understandings that a student should develop during their time at university. Attributes that influence assessment design include “global citizenship” and “work-readiness”. These attributes are intended to operate at programme-level and their implementation is monitored via programme validation processes.

The multiplicity of reference points and of stakeholders in curriculum design creates considerable challenges for module and programme tutors and for those involved in validation and moderation activities. Respondents reported that in some cases the overall university frameworks could over-ride the opinions of other stakeholders (for example, professional bodies or employers) advising on the content and mode of delivery of curricula. There is some concern that the use of institution-wide frameworks to deliver “distinctive” graduates could be seen as a marketing exercise rather than as a way to deliver consistent and high-quality educational experiences across the institution.

Decisions about modes of delivery occur at both central and local levels. Non-traditional modes of delivery, particularly partnership delivery, are central to the business plan of at least one institution participating in this study. In some cases, Schools or Faculties are the driving force behind innovative delivery modes (for example, online delivery).

Availability of appropriate learning resources and student support (ESG standards 1.2 and 1.5)?

Arrangements for the provision of learning resources and student support differ across institutions according to the financial models in place at each institution. In general, responsibility for estates, library provision, online learning or VLEs and for student-facing learning support is managed as a set of central services. Additional local provision is managed at School/Faculty/Department level according to need.

One trend apparent from this study is the enhanced focus on “the student experience” as a coherent, carefully managed and central part of university business. This renewed focus is typified by the creation of new strategic posts in a number of the universities participating in this study that are directly responsible for the management of the student experience. Although inevitably the scope and nature of the role is different according to organisational need, typical responsibilities include managing student-facing services including Registry and Student Support, overseeing the collection of data including the National Student Survey and leading university-wide initiatives (for example, on employability).

For some participants in this study, there is the perceived possibility of tension between the centralisation of responsibility for the student experience and the commitment to quality at local level. There is some debate about the extent to which standardisation of practice across the institution is the same as ensuring good quality across the institution. Some central support mechanisms (for example, the provision of VLEs) are perceived as *de facto* instruments of standardisation.

Periodic reviews of programmes including feedback from employers and alumni (ESG standard 1.2)?

Participants in this study reported a variety of institution-wide changes to the management and governance of periodic review that are linked to wider strategic initiatives. In broad terms, there are three types of change activities that can be identified across the participating universities.

Firstly, institutions have worked to “tighten”, “streamline” or “strengthen” the communication channels between the centre and the distributed units of the university (i.e. Faculties or Schools). Typical measures have included:

- changes to the pattern of representation on central committees to ensure that the right School/Faculty officers are involved in decision-making, are fully informed about university policy and direction and are clear about the role of their sub-unit in implementing policy
- changes in the timing and content of reporting from local sub-units to the centre to improve the centre’s ability to assess performance on key indicators at local level and to support remedial action
- changes to the academic planning process to “streamline” activities and to minimise blockages or bottlenecks

Work has also been undertaken at a number of institutions to review the portfolio of programmes, with the aim of reducing redundant or unattractive programmes.

Participants reported some challenges with new processes that are designed to facilitate more efficient collection of data and better decision-making, but have been perceived to add new layers of bureaucracy. There is some concern that the impact of increased bureaucracy and increased pressure for programmes and modules to “perform” as part of a business case may inhibit innovation or experimentation. Despite these concerns, most respondents reported that they felt confident in the commitment and ability of academic colleagues to continue to improve teaching methods.

6. European Standards and Guidelines

Are you familiar with the European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance (ESG)?

Does the ESG directly influence any aspect of the management of quality assurance? If not, what other frameworks or guidelines are influential?

Participants at all institutions reported low levels of familiarity with ESG1, both personally and in terms of ESG's use across their institution as a reference point or document to guide practice. "AB I am aware of those guidelines, but they do not play a day-to-day part in my working life". tNo participants reported that ESG was used as a working document at their university. A number of respondents who reported that they had seen or read ESG1 remarked that they felt the document was "a bit underwhelming"; "not immediately useful" or "a bit basic" when compared to other reference points more commonly in use (for example, the Codes of Practice published by the QAA). One participant noted that:

"The EU is not high on the list when we come to reference points. There's a feeling that we do all of that stuff under the QAA... that's the big bible."

A number of participants discussed the widespread assumption that by following QAA guidelines, their institutions were *de facto* compliant with ESG1. One participant at University B noted that:

"The University quality assures its awards in accordance with the requirements of the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education. In responding to QAA requirements the University is confident that it satisfies the European standards and guidelines on Quality Assurance of Higher Education. The ENQA Board confirmed that the QAA was fully compliant in 14 of the 16 European standards, and substantially compliant in the remaining two."

Participants noted that if QAA's own guidance were not in alignment with the ESG, that this could constitute a significant barrier to ESG1 implementation at institutional level because the QAA's frameworks are so influential across the UK.

Participants also commonly reported the increasing influence of the National Student Survey¹⁶ and the HEFCE/HESA Key Information Sets (KIS)¹⁷ on the development of institutional policies for educational quality. There is some concern that these performative measures have become disproportionately important, which highlights the tension in the UK quality sector between the developmental nature of enhancement and the need to avoid the punitive impact of low attainment in externally-imposed quality measures.

16 For more information, see: <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>

17 For more information, see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm>

Participants amongst the academic staff noted the importance of frameworks and guidelines associated with their own subject areas (for example, medicine, teaching, law). A number of participants also described the importance of support in accessing appropriate information about quality and implementing good practice. At University D, participants praised the work of the central Quality and Curriculum Services team who provide a valued “human” approach to quality management. Other participants described their institution’s arrangements for staff development, including either central or School/Faculty-based learning development centres as sources of expertise.

Many participants were also keen to point out that compliance with externally derived frameworks such as ESG1 or QAA’s Code of Practice is only one dimension of quality management. This was perhaps most explicitly articulated at University C (which is in line with Scotland’s distinctive approach to quality enhancement) but was also apparent at other institutions, particularly at University D. The enhancement model anticipates that effective management of quality should encourage innovation, sharing of new practices and continuous improvement based on considered use of local data. This model offers the possibility of institutional divergence from external guidelines or codes of practice whilst still delivering high quality provision. The QAA’s approach to institutional audit/review (particularly in Scotland) allows for variation in practice and, potentially, for more significant divergence as long as the innovation can be properly defended. In Scotland, the QAA Enhancement Themes have been designed to encourage the development and dissemination of innovation in learning and teaching. QAA in England and Wales also supports different opportunities for universities to develop and discuss new practice.

Another dimension of the UK university experience is the extent to which alignment with Europe is recognised as a desirable or strategically useful outcome of quality arrangements. Although few participants in this study discussed this issue in great detail, the thrust of much of the internalisation of UK higher education in the past decade has been towards no-EU markets, particularly in China, India, Pakistan and the Middle East. The extent to which greater visibility of ESG1 as a quality tool would aid UK institutions in strengthening these markets is highly questionable.

4. Major findings and policy recommendations

5.1. Identification of barriers to implementation of governance procedures with relevance to supranational level

Evidence from this study clearly demonstrates that ESG1 is not widely recognised and very little used as a working document to guide governance arrangements at institutional level in the UK. UK universities are indisputably influenced by government steering, which determines the scope and content of governance and decision-making activities. The structure and nature of governing bodies and of governance of educational quality at lower levels of the institution is primarily guided by the CUC Code of Practice (2002/2009) and the QAA Code of Practice and (especially for post-1992 institutions), by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992).

Inevitably, UK universities are primarily influenced by frameworks and other steering

mechanisms that are associated with sanctions for non-compliance. It would be very foolhardy, for example, for any university in the UK at present not to take pains to publicise its efforts to improve every aspect of the student experience, given the risks associated with failing to attract enough students to fill its programmes. Similarly, although the QAA audit and review processes offer universities the freedom to innovate in the management of quality, any significant deviation from the QAA's Code of Practice must be demonstrably defensible. Universities in England and Wales that do not submit acceptable plans for widening access to OFFA risk curtailment of their freedom to leverage higher undergraduate fees.

Given this environment of “steering with sanction”, any further code of practice or set of guidelines that does not have sanctions associated with it must be seen to add significant value for it to be adopted. The view from the UK institutions participating in this study is that ESG1 does not add any value beyond the QAA guidelines. There is a broad assumption that alignment with the QAA Code of Practice means *de facto* alignment with ESG1.

Many participants were very keen to make clear that compliance, particularly with an externally-derived framework or guidelines, is not the intended outcome of their governance or quality arrangements.

Recommendations:

- ENQA might wish to consider whether there is value in strengthening the monitoring and reporting of compliance with ESG1 at institutional level. This might be most conveniently handled by QAA as part of the standard periodic review of UK universities.

5.2 Identification of barriers to implementation of governance procedures with relevance to national level

Participants in this study noted that there is a the potential for tension between the increased “marketisation” of higher education in the UK (partly as a result of changes to UK higher education funding precipitated by the recommendations in the 2010 Browne Review) and perceived increased levels of external scrutiny and accountability measures. Marketisation of the sector implies that UK universities must diversify and act more like business to position themselves to survive an increasingly competitive environment. Competition may come from other publically funded institutions, or from commercial, private institutional providers, or from overseas providers or from educational spin-offs from established industry. Many UK universities are responding to changes in funding arrangements by diversifying their business base (for example, entering into partnerships with other domestic or overseas providers or with industry, by creating different forms of educational provision including bespoke courses for industry or by leveraging resources such as the university estate to raise revenue). This diversification has the potential to create new governance needs that may not be met by current structures or processes.

Participants in this study noted that diversification activities including partnerships with other providers often create governance challenges. There is little evidence from

this study however that there has been much serious attempt to rethink governance arrangements to re-frame the relationships between universities and their partners or to challenge the assumption that the university's governance arrangements should focus only on "core business" (which is most likely to be focused on research and student experience issues). Other aspects of university business are currently less likely to be strongly reflected in governance activities but may become an increasingly large part of the institutional corporate model (examples might include summer schools, hotels/accommodation/hospitality, corporate events).

One question is whether sector-wide guidelines or codes of practice currently reflect the real "business" of universities and whether monolithic sector-wide guidelines can properly reflect the potential diversity in the higher education sector. There is already evidence that current governance arrangements do not properly reflect the needs of "third space" professionals working within the sector and this study suggests that certain groups within the student population are under-represented. As universities diversify further, new constituencies of stakeholders and new modes of information-gathering and decision-making are very likely to emerge.

Similarly, it seems valid to ask whether the multiplicity of national targets and performance measures required of universities (National Student Survey, KIS, OFFA Agreements etc.), which have together had a highly significant impact on the structure and activities of institutional governance will continue to be fit for purpose in an increasingly diversified sector.

Recommendations:

- The UK sector (in particular HEFCE/SFC and QAA) may wish to consider whether the advice and guidelines offered to UK institutions will remain fit for purpose in a context of increased diversification of university activity. National research into the changing scope of university business and its governance implications may be beneficial.

5.3 Identification of barriers to implementation of governance procedures with relevance to institutional level

A number of participants described their experiences of the tension between the speed of decision-making required to respond to environmental pressures and changes in external policy with the perceived need to retain collegiality and consultation in governance activities. Whilst senior managers participating in this study described their efforts to ensure that all university constituencies are represented in decision-making and have "ownership" of institutional strategy, the picture from lower down institutions is more mixed. Respondents reported that consultation activities do not always feel authentic, that some voices (for example, part-time staff members) are not always readily heard and that pace and scale of changes can leave staff charged with implementation feeling over-loaded.

In some cases there is reported tension between local ownership of governance of quality assurance at local level (for example, in the design and validation of programmes) and larger, institution-wide initiatives (for example, those defining

graduate attributes or seeking to enhance graduate employability) that threaten to supersede or override local or stakeholder views of good quality education. Evidence from this study suggests that institutions are increasingly concerned about demonstrating distinctiveness in order to attract students. One question is whether large-scale, university wide initiatives, which enable the university to market the overall distinctiveness of its educational provision, are a better route to “good quality” than locally owned, subject-specific and academically defined outcomes. Universities which pursue large scale, top-down strategic initiatives which seek to define the composition and aims of taught provision may risk alienation of skilled staff.

Despite the recent focus on the composition and effectiveness of governing bodies in the higher education media, our study did not uncover any widespread concern or dissatisfaction with university boards. A significant majority of staff and students canvassed identified their institution’s executive team (Vice-Chancellor or Principal and the university’s Executive Office or equivalent) as the locus of strategic direction and policy change. Whilst some respondents reported dissatisfaction with the implementation of new policy (particularly in the perceived ineffectiveness of consultation exercises and difficulties with the speed of change) no respondents reported that they had particular concerns about the accountability or competence of the Vice-Chancellor/Principal or the university executive team.

A number of participants identified the difference between the effective institutional management of risk and being unhelpfully risk-averse. Avoidance of risk must not be the principal driver in governance arrangements and there should be room for innovation and risk-taking. The current challenges in the external environment may be encouraging some managers towards a more risk-averse model of decision-making, which could risk stifling creativity and innovation.

The diversification of university core business does not yet seem to be having any significant impact on the design of governance systems. Evidence from this study suggests that there is “business” that is seen as a valid topic of discussion in governance forums (e.g. research, education quality, the student experience) and “other activities” (some aspects of knowledge exchange, commercial activities) that are not commonly debated or discussed.

Recommendations:

- UK universities might benefit from institutional, or sector-wide work in the effective analysis and assessment of risk.
- UK universities may wish to consider whether the changing nature of higher education, including changes to job design, student expectations, and the portfolio of core business might require changes to governance arrangements.

Institutional Case Studies

See additional attachment.