

Viewpoint: Peter Green's recent article entitled 'QAA Reviews; Fact or Fabrication'

Tommie Anderson-Jaquest⁴, PhD

Introduction

I have recently read Professor Green's interesting critique of the QAA Review process (JCD&MS, 5.1:7-13). The article is thought-provoking and well written, but some of the assertions made must be questioned. I challenge claims made that preparation and training for QAA review events result in a fabrication of performance, that QAA Reviewers are biased and that the current model is untenable. However, I fully support the author's view that the existing model warrants some reshaping.

Preparation for QAA events: fabrication of performance or learning experience?

In Professor Green's article, the assertion is made that QAA Higher Education Reviews (HERs) for Alternative Providers promote and nurture staff collusion resulting in a fabrication of performance. His claim ignores the positive contribution that QAA reviews make towards strengthening prospects for creating a level playing field in UK Higher Education and ending the monopoly over HE previously exercised by publicly funded universities. In my view, deep learning within HE institutions has taken place over time as a direct consequence of QAA requirements for meeting the Expectations set out in the UK Quality Code, mastering a common vocabulary for explaining and communicating quality processes and developing robust internal structures for monitoring and measuring quality assurance and enhancement outcomes. Professor Green states that in his present institution, passing QAA reviews is all about learning the lines and practicing them until competent and that training constitutes an exercise for parrots. This position fails to consider the positive benefits associated with training and preparation for QAA reviews: in particular the fact that preparation and training prior to events also improves staff competency in managing internal transitions from informal methods of quality management characterised by unique terminologies coined in silos to formalised structures that can be suitably aligned with regulatory body requirements in the UK HE sector. As a consequence of meeting Expectations set out in the UK Quality Code and adopting the quality vocabulary expected by QAA, Alternative Providers have strengthened prospects for establishing effective communication bridges with a wide variety of HE providers and UK regulatory bodies.

QAA Reviewer Panels: Biased or Impartial?

In Professor Green's view, QAA's current methodology rooted in institutional self-evaluation supported by evidence is of dubious validity, because Reviewers, more commonly drawn from publicly funded Higher Education Institutions are unlikely to understand the internal workings of Alternative Providers on a day-to-day basis. He also claims that QAA provides insufficient attention to ensuring that match of reviewers assigned to private HE providers is appropriate. Consequently, it is the luck of the draw whether a College gets positive or negative reviewers.

The implication that QAA Reviewers are likely to be biased against Alternative Providers in their final judgements must be questioned. In the QAA Reviews that I have undertaken, Panel members have worked as a team to produce fair and impartial judgements, sometimes reversing initial adverse impressions formed in scrutinizing desk evidence. Changes in direction have taken place, largely as a

consequence of Alternative Providers exercising considerable power to alter negative impressions of QAA panelists. I argue that this feat has not been accomplished by fabricating the truth, but by expressing the truth, using a vocabulary equally familiar to both parties.

QAA Model – Invalid or an instrument of learning?

According to Professor Green, "Alternative Providers will continue to be subject to QAA reviews that are dubious in terms of validity, reliability and generalizability", but his claim has been made without the benefit of substantial evidence. Furthermore, the author has neglected to mention the degree of positive learning that takes place in HE Private Providers as a consequence of engaging in QAA Reviews and aligning internal quality systems to meet Expectations set out in the UK Quality Code.

In his view, the model QAA operates is simplistic, has never been interrogated

⁴ QAA Reviewer and Link Tutor, Coventry University. Formerly, Principal Lecturer and Dean of Quality & Standards and Research, St Patrick's International College, London. All correspondence to: tscanderson@msn.com

thoroughly and is cheap to operate, but the statement fails to take into account the complicated political controversies existing within the sector that have prevented the QAA from undertaking such in-depth reviews and investigations of this kind up to now. In 2012, for example, QAA was asked to undertake an enormous task of reviewing all HE alternative providers at short notice without previous experience of private HE provision. Since then, there has been very little time for QAA to undertake a comprehensive review, given changes “back and forth” in the HE Sector, Government shifts in policy and the lack of a comprehensive HE Bill. In addition, financial scandals associated with Recruitment and Admissions procedures in private Colleges since 2012 have generated a lack of confidence in Alternative Provider models on the part of QAA, HEFCE, the National Audit Office, the Department for Education (formerly BIS), in addition to University Partners and awarding bodies involved in collaborative arrangements. The programme televised on Panorama in November 2017 continues to provide clear evidence of ongoing distrust.

Professor Green makes a positive recommendation for improving the QAA's

approach to reviews undertaken with Alternative Providers, and this is the section of his article that I welcome most. In his view, “An alternative method, that would be more valid and reliable, might be a process model of continuous development, where a QAA panel-member works for three or four days with the institution prior to preparation”. In some ways the suggestion resembles principles enshrined in the QAA's IQER initiative implemented several years ago that focused exclusively upon developmental activities in the first year. In my previous institution, for example, staff members learned a great deal in the first year about sector requirements, which became firmly embedded as standard quality processes and procedures thereafter.

No model is perfect or eternal. Consequently, it would be very interesting to explore ideas for future development in 2018. Hopefully, Professor Green will oblige us in the near future with a sequel outlining his recommendations for improving current models associated with QAA Reviews, particularly the ones operating in respect of Alternative Providers.

Reference

Green, Peter (2017). “Viewpoint, QAA Reviews; Fact or Fabrication”, *Journal of Contemporary Development and Management Studies*, Vol 5, no. 1, pp 8 – 14.