
The SCONUL Working Group on Quality Assurance - what is it doing for you?



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The first point to make about the QA (Quality Assurance) Working Group is that it is a joint group with representation from UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association – ie. Heads of IT) and SChOMS (Standing Conference for Heads of Media Services). It is therefore in a strong lobbying position in relation to any external quality auditing agency such as the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency), acting as spokesperson for three important central services in universities and colleges.

Indeed the group perceives advocacy as its principal role, with the QAA in particular because of the significance of its auditing role with Higher Education. In the past the group has also sought to make OfSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) aware of the significance of our services in the education and training of teachers with a joint Best Practice project. The Group's web pages also have links to other specific professional bodies which are involved in accreditation or quality assurance processes in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

QAA

The group's relationship with the QAA has always been a key factor in the group's activity, taking up most of its agenda. One of the QAA's officers is the group's contact and meets regularly with the Chair. These meetings afford an opportunity for the communication of developments in

the QAA's approach to auditing institutions and the student experience in all parts of the UK, and a chance to persuade the QAA of the centrality of our services to student learning and the support of research activity. Recently it has been important to persuade the agency of the part we all play in the development of e-learning, in enabling effective VLE use and the provision and management of access to online information resources, not to mention our training function.

Related advocacy also takes place by group members, e.g. Group Secretary and Scotland representative, Michael Breaks, recently encouraged SCURL (Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries) to provide a written response to the recent Scottish consultation from the QAA on its latest proposal for changes to the auditing of HEIs in Scotland.

ADVICE

Another important function of the working group is to provide members of all three organisations with advice as you all prepare for audit, review or any other QA activity by external agencies. Guidelines are provided on the web site to assist with Institutional Audit in England and Northern Ireland, soon to be followed by similar advice for Scotland and Wales. The web pages also include a few examples of members' experience of audit. The site is not hugely populated yet, but we hope to receive more helpful accounts in the near future. With the help of the Working Group on Performance Improvement, some of this information will be included in the Performance Portal.

OTHER ACTIVITY

From time to time members of the QA group have undertaken surveys of internal QA activity experienced by members, the results of which can also be made available for all. Currently Helen Fletcher is compiling your responses to her brief survey for the web site.

Our group is also considering a joint approach to HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) with the Working Group on Performance Improvement to suggest a more informative set of questions relating to our services for the NSS, National Student Survey. This survey is assuming greater and greater significance and we feel that a more meaningful result could be elicited by changes to the wording of the questionnaire.

DILEMMA FOR OUR SERVICES

When quality audit comes round, it can feel sometimes that the simple option is to sit tight, keep your head down, and rely on the institutional and student statements as evidence for the performance of your service. This has its risks and it can leave an impression of a passive, reactive service. The view taken by the joint group is that we all need to be given opportunities to tell our own stories, directly to any visiting quality agency, and that there ought to be every encouragement to these agencies to understand the central proactive role played by our services in learning, teaching and research. I hope that your Working Group is helping to achieve this.