Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?

QAA

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND *hefce*

The Higher Education Academy

Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Introduction

This report is an outcome of joint working by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (the Academy), with the support of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), on a project with the aims of exploring how institutions in England and Northern Ireland viewed quality assurance (QA), quality enhancement (QE) and the nature of the links between them, and increasing collaboration between QAA and the Academy in promoting and supporting quality enhancement.

The project team felt that at this time there would be value in engaging in conversations across the whole of the higher education (HE) community in England and Northern Ireland about how 'enhancement' is perceived and defined, what its relationship to quality assurance might be, and how it might be changing.

The report is based on an enquiry that involved collecting and analysing data from semi-structured discussions with a sample of higher education institutions (HEIs), conducted through QAA's institutional liaison scheme. The intention is to reflect back to the sector the diverse ways in which 'quality enhancement' is conceptualised, led, managed and supported in institutions with different characteristics and missions across England and Northern Ireland.

A basic principle underlying the work is the expectation that institutional approaches will vary, that QE may be embedded in different ways in individual institutional strategies and that there will rightly exist a diversity of approach and language. Consequently, the gathering and reporting of the information was framed in a way intended to avoid being directive or prescriptive. For example, the project stresses that the QAA definition of enhancement used for institutional audit is not to be taken as a concept intended to confine institutions to a single approach.

While we hope that the report will be valuable as a snapshot of how quality enhancement was viewed across the HE sectors of England and Northern Ireland (E&NI) in early 2008, its primary purpose is to act as a focus for further discussion and conversations between QAA, the Academy and the HE community in England and Northern Ireland, and in particular at a national conference in June 2008, organised and supported by HEFCE, the Academy and QAA.

Project objectives

The objectives of the project are:

- to support institutions in addressing an increasing external attention on quality enhancement
- to explore the variety of current perceptions and conceptions of quality enhancement in the sector
- to illustrate diverse and effective approaches to quality enhancement through a number of case studies
- to provide an opportunity for good practice and innovation to be shared
- to explore the relationship of national initiatives such as the Subject Centres, the National Student Survey (NSS) and Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) to institutional approaches to QE.

Process

The project scope is restricted to institutions in England and Northern Ireland only, since institutions in Scotland and Wales operate in rather different national settings for quality assurance, and it was felt important not to cut across current work on quality enhancement being undertaken in both countries. Sixty-four out of a possible 138 institutions in England and Northern Ireland participated in the project, providing a broadly representative sample.

The project team sought the views of institutions on a range of topics about quality enhancement, and the main body of information was acquired through interviews with institutional respondents. All the interviews were conducted within a framework of questions and prompts to give a measure of consistency.

The limitations on the outcomes of the project, imposed by both the data collection method and the time/resources available for analysis, needs to be acknowledged. The intention of the project team was to gather enough information to be able to offer a broad picture, sufficient to reflect back overall findings to the HE community in a way that could helpfully serve as a point of departure for future conversations. The information and its analysis, while limited, have generated a picture that we believe can be discussed with some confidence.

Headline findings

Although some unanticipated aspects also emerged, the findings broadly confirmed the assumptions of the project team:

- a considerable amount of structural and organisational change is taking place or has taken place recently in many institutions – particularly, but not exclusively in the post-1992 sector
- there have been significant changes for a number of institutions achieving university status since 2005
- the changes to the institutional audit method are affecting institutions in varying ways, and are broadly welcomed, with occasional reservations
- there is ambivalence about the relationship of enhancement and institutional audit
- there is no agreement about a single definition of QE – the range of definitions fall into some patterns, but these are not easily characterised by institutional type
- the definition of QE offered by QAA for institutional audit purposes is broadly recognised as helpful (but challenged by a small minority of institutions)
- there is evidence of considerable strategic thinking about QE across the sector, but this is not often formulated in a specific QE strategy
- QE has become an increasing focus, or increasingly explicit concern, for most institutions, and is often linked to learning and teaching (L&T) strategies or to the broader strategic management of the student experience
- there is evidence of a sense of maturity of QA processes, supported by evidence from institutional audit that processes are robust, and that confidence in the assurance of quality is actively built on by institutions to facilitate enhancement
- there is evidence in many institutions of changes in processes and structures related to quality, and these are often linked with enhancement activity.

Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?

1   Purpose of the report

1.1   This report is an outcome of joint working by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (the Academy), with the support of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), on a project with the aims of exploring how institutions in England and Northern Ireland viewed quality assurance (QA), quality enhancement (QE) and the nature of the links between them, and increasing collaboration between QAA and the Academy in promoting and supporting quality enhancement.

1.2   The report is based on an enquiry that involved collecting and analysing data from semi-structured discussions with a sample of HEIs, conducted through QAA's institutional liaison scheme.

1.3   The intention of the project team is to reflect back to the sector the diverse ways in which 'quality enhancement' is conceptualised, led, managed and supported in institutions with different characteristics and missions across England and Northern Ireland.

1.4   While we hope that the report will be valuable as a snapshot of how quality assurance and quality enhancement were viewed across the HE sectors of England and Northern Ireland (E&NI) in early 2008, its primary purpose is to act as a focus for further discussion and conversations between QAA, the Academy and the HE community in E&NI, and in particular at a national conference in June 2008, organised and supported by HEFCE, the Academy and QAA.

1.5   Among the objectives of the project are:

- to support institutions in addressing an increasing external attention on quality enhancement
- to explore the variety of current perceptions and conceptions of quality enhancement in the sector
- to illustrate diverse and effective approaches to quality enhancement through a number of case studies
- to provide an opportunity for good practice and innovation to be shared
- to explore the relationship of national initiatives such as the Subject Centres, NSS and CETLs to institutional approaches to QE.

1.6 This report explores a number of themes related to enhancement in HE that emerged through conversations between QAA institutional liaison officers and the HE institutions with which they are linked. The themes are illustrated by unattributed comments from institutional representatives, intended to give a 'flavour' of their views and of the discussions overall. The findings of the project are prefaced by a brief overview of the context in which quality enhancement has developed and an outline of the process employed in the study.

2   The context

2.1 The enquiry set out to explore and test a number of assumptions about the way in which 'quality enhancement' was changing in institutions. There are a number of reasons to assume that quality enhancement is the focus of a good deal of change in the HE sector (see below), and the changes to QE can be seen to be intimately connected with a range of other features of the HE landscape. The increasing emphasis on enhancement that is explored in this project is driven, to an extent, by contextual changes in, for example, the concept of 'student', the relationship of the student to the HE provision and the perception of the role of the HE sector in society. Some of these larger contextual factors reveal themselves as underlying the concern of institutions to make 'enhancement' as effective as possible. The effects of such things as changing student expectations, the impact of fees, the growing reputational significance of NSS and league tables, the challenges of widening participation, and an increasing concern for employability are all reflected somewhere in the information gathered by the project.

2.2 The project team's starting point was the following assumptions:

1. Over the last few years it seems possible to trace across the HE sector a growing emphasis on the explicit enhancement of quality. This is associated, perhaps, with the growth in the present decade of a sense of shared confidence about the sector's ability to assure quality and standards effectively.

2. Within institutions, the enhancement of learning and teaching has often been assumed to be an implicit part of the work of individual teachers, but appears to be increasingly the subject of explicit discourse. In many cases, structures and processes to support quality enhancement are receiving more attention than in the past – the balance between those institutional resources directed to assurance and those to enhancement is being adjusted.

3. There are also signs of this change in institutional learning and teaching or educational strategies, which appear to make more specific reference to enhancement and its links with quality assurance.

4. Quality enhancement as a concept and its relationship to quality assurance appear to be understood in a number of different ways. For example, in some cases the relationship may be conceived of as hierarchical (assurance of quality is seen as a necessary component of effective enhancement, or vice versa); in others the two are mutually reinforcing, but parallel, concepts.

2.3   The project team thought that while these assumptions might indeed reflect reality, and while evidence of these QE developments could apparently be identified in many individual institutions and organisations, there had as yet been limited opportunity to explore the developments in a more structured or systematic way.

2.4   In addition, it was important to consider how the evolving focus on QE, summarised by HEFCE as a *"shift in the balance towards enhancement"*[1], is reflected in and nourished by the work of cross-sector bodies such as HEFCE itself, QAA and the Higher Education Academy.

2.5   HEFCE's support for enhancement has, until recently, been seen as separate from its concern for quality. Since the late 1990s HEFCE has provided targeted funding through a single Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), in which explicit approaches to enhancement are supported within institutions through learning and teaching strategies, and across the sector through support for Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), the Academy and its Subject Centre Network, and other initiatives.

1. *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework,* HEFCE 2005/35, paragraph 32

2.6 Quality management has always had an element of quality enhancement, but prior to 2006 this was not a prominent aspect of institutional audit. In part, this stemmed from QAA's view that the process of quality management must secure academic standards before it can confidently turn to quality enhancement.

2.7 In 2005, the existing institutional audit method for England and Northern Ireland was reviewed by the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group (QAFRG) on behalf of HEFCE, who concluded that: *"a stronger enhancement aspect to institutional audit will deliver increased benefits to students and to institutions"*[2], and therefore the group wished *"to see a shift in the balance [in external audit] towards enhancement"*.

2. *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework,* HEFCE 2005/35, paragraph 32

2.8 As a consequence, with the encouragement of HEFCE, QAA has moved to increase the attention given in institutional audit to an overt focus on enhancement. There is a view that the picture emerging from previous rounds of institutional audit has secured for the HE sector in England and Northern Ireland a level of confidence among stakeholders, within which a more enhancement-led approach to quality assurance can be seen as appropriate.

2.9 The Academy is a body with a specific remit to support enhancement, exemplified in its aim to *"support institutions in their strategies for improving the student learning experience"*[3]. Its work in relation to professional standards and subject communities, for example, has increasingly influenced the way HE institutions approach enhancement UK-wide.

3. www.heacademy.ac.uk/aboutus

2.10 The Academy and QAA have been collaborating closely on approaches to quality enhancement as this is an area of mutual interest and the development of the present project is a product of this continuing collaboration. The two organisations have had several meetings to discuss enhancement, and the notes of these are available on the QAA website[4].

4. www.qaa.ac.uk/events/ workingconference06/ default.asp

www.qaa.ac.uk/education/ hea/20060123Languages.asp

2.11　The Scottish experience with the enhancement-led approach has undoubtedly also influenced thinking in other parts of the UK. Scottish arrangements including Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), the linked but separate Enhancement Themes[5] and student participation in quality assurance and enhancement through the sparqs (student participation in quality scotland) project and web site have been prominent in the work of QAA Scotland and in the Academy's activities in Scotland. Within Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has recently commissioned a review with a view to developing a quality enhancement framework.

2.12　The project team felt that there would be value in engaging in conversations across the whole of the HE community in England and Northern Ireland about how 'enhancement' is perceived and defined, what its relationship to quality assurance might be, and how it might be changing.

2.13　The project team also felt it important to do this while being non-directive, recognising that there rightly exists a diversity of approach and language.

2.14　Although QAA has a definition of enhancement that it uses for institutional audit[6], the project stresses that this is not to be taken as a concept intended to confine institutions to a single approach. It is to be expected that institutional approaches will be different and that QE may be embedded in various ways in individual institutional strategies.

3 Methodology

3.1 Process

3.1.1 The project team sought to elicit the views of institutions on a range of topics relating to quality enhancement, and the main body of information was acquired through interviews with institutional respondents.

3.1.2 After some consultation, it was decided to restrict the scope of this project to institutions in England and Northern Ireland only, on the basis that institutions in Scotland and Wales operate in rather different national settings for quality assurance. In addition, it was felt important not to cut across current work on quality enhancement being undertaken in both countries.

3.1.3 Sixty-four out of a possible 138 institutions in England and Northern Ireland participated in the project, providing a broadly representative sample. Interviews took place between December 2007 and February 2008; some by telephone, but most at specially convened meetings at the institution.

3.1.4 Since the project team wished to explore views across a range of institutional types, it was helpful that the 64 responses reflected the diversity of the sector. There were:

- 25 from pre-1992 universities
- 23 from post-1992 universities
- seven from post-2005 universities
- one from a university college
- eight from specialist or monotechnic institutions (five of which are institutions without degree-awarding powers).

3.1.5 Most interviews were conducted face to face, but some were conducted by telephone. In some cases a single respondent was interviewed, but in 60 per cent of interviews there was more than one respondent. The number of respondents, or their role, was not related to institutional type or size.

3.1.6 It should also be noted that responses may have been coloured by the fact that approaches for the project were made through the QAA liaison contacts for each institution.

3.1.7 QAA maintains a strict separation between audit/review activities and information offered by institutions through their meetings within its liaison scheme, and QAA Liaison Officers have no institutional audit or review-related contacts with 'their' liaison institutions. In the case of institutions, however, it is clear that some of the institutional liaison contacts either had been or presently were closely linked with preparations for institutional audits and other forms of external scrutiny.

3.1.8 The project team cannot, therefore, exclude the possibility that such connections might have led to more emphasis being placed on audit and assurance matters than may have been the case had discussions on the same topics been conducted through other means. It is also possible that not all our respondents are aware of the full range of ways in which their institutions engage with the Academy or have deployed TQEF and this may partially explain the limited number of references to these matters.

3.1.9 All the interviews with institutions' respondents followed a common framework of topics, questions and prompts to guide the conversations and to ensure that all respondents had a chance to comment on or respond to a similar range of matters. The framework was shared in advance with institutions, and recipients were encouraged to share it with colleagues prior to interviews.

3.1.10 The framework led discussion through definitions and conceptions of QE, strategic approaches to QE, and processes and structures to support QE. Some additional questions were designed to provide opportunities to discuss more specific issues that might have been overlooked, such as the use of evidence, the role of students and the place of external scrutiny in relation to QE. The framework is annexed to this report.

3.1.11 Responses varied in overall length, and different question areas were given fuller responses by different institutions. The records of conversations were made by a number of different QAA colleagues, and the style of recording (and, by inference, of the conversations themselves) therefore varies considerably.

3.1.12　The records of the interviews were collated and analysed using qualitative research software to identify potential patterns among the diverse conceptions and approaches that were described. Early stages of the analysis were conducted by members of the project team, but the final analysis and the report writing was the work of a single author, checked by the team. In addition to the records of interviews, some institutions provided additional documentation.

3.1.13　The interview data both confirmed that the initial questions used in planning the interviews were relevant and, at the same time, revealed additional sub-themes to explore.

3.2　Limitations of the enquiry

3.2.1　The limitations on the outcomes of the project, imposed by both the data collection method and the time/resources available for analysis, needs to be acknowledged. The intention of the project team was to gather enough information to be able to offer a broad picture, sufficient to reflect back overall findings to the HE community in a way that could helpfully serve as a point of departure for future conversations. The information and its analysis, while limited, have generated a picture that we believe can be discussed with some confidence.

3.2.2　There has been a limited attempt to seek causal or correlational relationships – the reasons why different institutions may hold different definitions of QE, for example. Such a step would have been beyond the resources of the project, and indeed beyond the intentions of the project team. Nonetheless, where patterns appear with sufficient clarity the report does draw attention to them.

3.2.3　In the sections that follow, comments from the records of conversations have been used to illustrate the range of responses. As far as possible these are exact quotations from the record, but it has occasionally been necessary to paraphrase in order to clarify meaning.

3.3   A broad view of the picture – headlines

3.3.1   The study confirms that the assumptions made in Section 2 above, about the particular situation of quality enhancement in HE, are broadly correct. Some additional interesting factors have emerged.

3.3.2   The headline findings then, are perhaps, mostly unsurprising:

- a considerable amount of structural and organisational change is taking place or has taken place recently in many institutions – particularly, but not exclusively in the post-1992 sector

- there have been significant changes for a number of institutions achieving university status since 2005

- the changes to the institutional audit method are affecting institutions in varying ways, and are broadly welcomed, with occasional reservations

- there is ambivalence about the relationship of enhancement and institutional audit

- there is no agreement about a single definition of QE – the range of definitions fall into some patterns, but these are not easily characterised by institutional type

- the definition of QE offered by QAA for institutional audit purposes is broadly recognised as helpful (but challenged by a small minority of institutions)

- there is evidence of considerable strategic thinking about QE across the sector, but this is not often formulated in a specific QE strategy

- QE has become an increasing focus, or increasingly explicit concern, for most institutions, and is often linked to learning and teaching (L&T) strategies or to the broader strategic management of the student experience

- there is evidence of a sense of maturity of QA processes, supported by evidence from institutional audit that processes are robust, and that confidence in the assurance of quality is actively built on by institutions to facilitate enhancement

- there is evidence in many institutions of changes in processes and structures related to quality, and these are often linked with enhancement activity.

4 Change

4.1 Recent and ongoing change in the sector

4.1.1 The rationale for this project assumed that in response to a number of external and internal drivers, institutions have been engaged in more or less substantial change during recent years (wider than simply change to QE/QA).

4.1.2 In particular, the project team anticipated that a large number of institutions were reviewing and, in many cases, changing the ways in which they think about, define, manage, implement and support the enhancement of quality. We expected that with the new institutional audit method now in place, institutions would be particularly mindful of how their QE arrangements might be viewed. An approaching institutional audit might add a further degree of urgency to an institution's desire to undertake improvements that are motivated by other drivers.

"External changes, as well as internal priorities, are leading to changes in the way the University approaches quality assurance and enhancement."

4.1.3 The evidence from the project seems to confirm that widespread changes in this area are taking place, but in doing so it also throws light on wider changes taking place in the sector that could affect the quality of the student experience itself and how institutions enhance it.

4.2 Major changes in institutions

4.2.1 Respondents note a number of specific changes in the HE sector that have directly or indirectly affected QE thinking or arrangements. Not all institutions have experienced the same changes or the same amount of change, but there is an undeniable picture of a sector in which structural change is common and often related to or driven by revisions or refocusing of thinking about fundamental matters such as the nature of student expectations; curriculum design and development; and student employability, progression and achievement.

"The institution is involved in new ways of thinking in terms of its changing mission…"

4.2.2 As might be expected, those institutions that have achieved university status since 2005, and those with aspirations in that direction, have been particularly engaged in considerable rethinking of their mission and structure, as part of their developing responsibilities and ambitions.

4.2.3 In addition, a number of (mainly post-1992) institutions have recently been through or are currently undergoing major changes. Nearly a fifth of all respondents explicitly, and without being prompted, mentioned major changes in their institution and others implied such changes had taken place. Sometimes these are changes to the organisational structure, such as major faculty reorganisations.

"… the University has decided to break up its centralised arrangements in favour of a college system which will bracket groups together."

4.2.4 Some institutions have made significant changes to the overall curriculum and delivery structures, for example, reorganising the framework of modules. In some cases major changes to both curriculum and delivery have taken place or are still in progress. Change may fall short of full-scale reorganisation, but still have wide institutional impact. Institutions note the additional challenge that change at this level can provide for quality enhancement.

"[the University] is developing, following a full-scale restructuring of committees…"

4.2.5 It is interesting to note that while this level and kind of whole-institution structural reorganisation is rarer among pre-1992 institutions' responses, it is not entirely absent, and one pre-1992 institution comments that it *"is about to restructure, which will also have an impact".*

4.2.6 One respondent from a pre-1992 institution describes the institution as going through considerable change at a level that includes *"renewing its mission and establishing a new corporate strategy".* This level of change unavoidably affects the culture of institutions, and does so in different ways.

4.2.7 Continual change may reduce the capacity of staff to respond to further new initiatives, either by a sense of 'change overload', or by simply reducing the time resource available. On the other hand, if change is perceived as constant and positive, then staff may become acclimatised to it and expect it.

"… there is a continuing awareness of the fact that the sands are ever shifting, both internally and externally, so that sense [of] change is a constant."

4.3 Changes to QA/QE

4.3.1 The project team anticipated when embarking on this study that it would find evidence of widespread changes in institutions to both thinking and practices related to QE. The information derived from the interviews amply confirms this. Some of this change has progressed over a period and has been more or less completed. In some institutions, it is more recent and aspects may still be very much in progress.

"The strategy set the direction for a period of change and development in the college's approach to enhancement which has been ongoing over the last three years."

4.3.2 The rate and scale of change is variable. In many cases it is presented as a gradual or incremental evolution of current practice, or increased explicitness of what is already present but implicit. In other institutions, it involves real and sometimes radical changes to practice.

"The culture within the institution has changed from 'audit/checking' to a more developmental approach."

4.3.3 Institutional responses highlight changes being made to all aspects of structures, processes, strategies and thinking.

4.3.4 Unlike much of the contextual change (such as major changes to institutional organisation), which is often experienced as unhelpful or even disruptive, changes that institutions are making or planning for their own QE arrangements are generally viewed as very positive by the respondents.

"Following a period of change from emphasis on QA to an emphasis on QE, structures are becoming increasingly consolidated."

4.3.5 This may reflect the fact that changes in QE – often far-reaching in intention – are seen as being changes that the institution itself has identified as necessary (although questions remain about which staff and how many in the institution feel this level of ownership). It may also be, of course, that the role held by most respondents in their institutions predisposes them to think positively about quality enhancement.

"The shift has occurred to some extent at the institutional level, but perhaps less so at the chalkface."

4.3.6 Institutions commonly stress increased attention to enhancement as the broad direction of change in relation to quality, perhaps reflecting a maturity of QA processes, student expectations and greater alignment at institutional level between QA and QE activities.

"There is a change of focus from QA to QE."

4.3.7 Changes to the way structures work may include changes to committees, or changes to the offices and units that support quality enhancement, or changes to the relationship between them. The direction of this change is often described in terms that imply greater levels of support and engagement for academic staff, and the reduction of unnecessary bureaucracy.

"The Academic Office and Enhancement Unit are working more closely together with programme teams on periodic review…"

4.3.8 Although much of the change to QE that institutions report is described in relation to these changes to formal quality structures or processes, it is clear in some cases that they are often only the most easily described manifestation of a bigger change.

"… in the matter of the relationship between QA and quality management and enhancement, the University is at the beginning of a journey."

4.3.9 For some institutions in the process of changing, it seems that change to the structures and processes may be seen as the means to bring about large-scale cultural change, in others it is the cultural change that leads, and from which it is anticipated appropriate structures will emerge. There does not appear to be any clear pattern related to the type of institution or its history.

"The university expects to experience and to be able to sense a change in culture, as well improvements in more formal measures."

4.4 Drivers for change to QE

4.4.1 When respondents talk about the reasons behind their institutions' changing approaches to QE they cite a number of drivers, although each respondent cites only the one or two most important for their individual institution. Across the total responses, a few drivers are repeated sufficiently often to be considered as having a broad relevance.

4.4.2 Of the commonly mentioned drivers one of the most significant is a perception of changes to student expectations; another, which is associated, is concern about student views, as reflected in the NSS or other forms of student feedback.

"The key drivers were likely to be students' expectations and staff beliefs and motivations."

4.4.3 The responses do little to reveal the specific nature of the changes in student expectation, which might cause concern for institutions. Although the results of the interviews provide little information on this, it is possible that institutions are foreseeing the emergence of a more consumerist concept of higher education on the part of students. This might, itself, merit further exploration.

"The worsening economic circumstances might…intensify students' interests in what they received from universities."

4.4.4 In the same light, it is worth noting that another driver that is cited by several institutions is the need to manage their reputations effectively.

"QE has become more prominent…NSS has been a major contributor to this change."

4.4.5 Several institutions remark on the importance of reputation management and raised a concern about rankings as a significant driver for increased focus on enhancement. This is often related to a concern about NSS outcomes as a driver, since this is seen to be one of the factors affecting institutions' position in the various press league tables.

"A big preoccupation across the University is the maintenance and enhancement of its reputation."

4.4.6 Part of an institution's reputation rests on the achievement and progression rates of its students. For institutions that have faced a particular challenge in this respect in the context of widening participation, there has been an added impetus to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities and to review and revise assessment methods to ensure that students are supported effectively. The change to a more systematic approach to QE has been partly driven by a perception that improvements need to be made.

"… the drivers for QE are student feedback [both local and NSS] and also forward planning."

4.4.7 The NSS is cited fairly frequently as a significant driver for change. For some this is driven by a concern to manage the institution's reputation.

"… the drivers are QAA Audit process and also NSS."

4.4.8 Two institutions expressed a more sceptical view about the value of NSS in institutional enhancement processes. (This is perhaps more significant in the discussion of the place of evidence in QE below.)

"The NSS is rather less influential, because of concerns about the limitations of the data."

4.4.9 Together these drivers present a picture of a sector that is motivated by the need to be responsive to student expectations, with an underlying anxiety about the effect on reputation of not meeting those expectations. Were it not for the fact that institutions often express, at the same time, an intrinsic motivation to change QE proactively, it could appear to be a quite instrumental driver.

4.4.10 There is a strong suggestion that in some institutions the perception of a changing national agenda has been recognised as an opportunity to formalise changes that have been emerging in their existing approaches to quality. Institutions have increasingly sensed that the processes in place left a gap between assurance and enhancement. This path of development in the institution is often reinforced by responding to recommendations arising from the last institutional audit.

"The main driver for a move to a higher profile for quality enhancement has been the natural development of the institution, informed by the most recent audit report."

4.4.11 Several institutions refer specifically to their previous institutional audit experiences as being an important source of changes they have made to their approach to quality.

"The institutional audit report was an important driver for change."

4.4.12 Institutional respondents sometimes refer to the importance of a more general awareness of increased debate in the sector around quality. A growing awareness of the enhancement-led approach supported by QAA Scotland, is cited by some institutions as contributing to the need for change.

"To view quality assurance and quality enhancement as separate was seen as a 'false paradigm'."

4.4.13 For several institutions, an important driver was the perception that an increased focus on QE would be an opportunity to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic activity (low value) and increase positive change activity (high value). As anticipated, institutional audit and assurance of quality are often cited in the responses as sources of excessive and unhelpful bureaucracy – adding to administrative burden without contributing to quality improvement, and at the same time instilling or reinforcing in academic staff, a negative 'box-ticking' view of quality.

"The institution will spend more time on quality, but less time on bureaucracy."

4.4.14 The change of focus could also be seen as moving away from a *"coercive or policing approach"* to updated arrangements that *"support and encourage change among staff rather than give the appearance of attempting to police or restrict them"*.

"For the future the aim is that the role of the Quality Enhancement Unit will be advisory rather than one of policing and checking on staff."

4.4.15 One institution in particular noted the dangers of too much change, and others commented that change to quality processes and structures inherently involved an element of risk.

"There is risk inherent in such large-scale changes, but QA processes should mitigate [sic] against this risk."

4.4.16 A specific concern is that changes to quality management have the potential to affect the security of academic standards, since the new arrangements might not provide sufficiently robust assurance procedures. This does raise questions of how institutions manage such risks. Little information about this emerges from the study, other than a suggestion that robust assurance processes should contribute.

4.4.17 Among the dangers faced when making changes, several respondents identified the risk of staff aversion to change. The potential resistance to change requires institutions to make sure that any change is *"both useful, and seen to be useful"* in order to sell the benefits to those who might be most affected by it.

4.4.18 While risks exist in undertaking major change, institutions do not seem to see this as unmanageable or significantly threatening. Institutions are broadly positive about the changes to quality management (at least at the level of the respondents to this survey) and see a greater emphasis on QE as having significant benefits – directly for students, and indirectly for institutional reputation.

"The college vision contains an element of risk in that it is ambitious and predicated on substantial change."

5 Definitions and concepts of quality enhancement

5.1 How definitions are developing

5.1.1 How institutions organise their strategies, processes and resources appropriately to undertake and support the enhancement of quality will depend to a great extent on the way in which they conceive of 'enhancement'. The degree to which this conception is shared among the institutional community will also impact on the effectiveness of the processes. This is a deeply complex matter in which to expect anything other than rich diversity would be foolhardy.

"The institution does not currently have a shared definition of QE, but it is working towards developing one."

5.1.2 In the guidance for institutional audit, QAA defines enhancement as *"the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities"*[7]. As we shall see, while this definition is generally acknowledged as helpful, particularly in relation to institutional audit, institutions are taking a variety of approaches to defining enhancement for themselves, and consequently arriving at a range of definitions. There is also a question raised whether enhancement should or even can be satisfactorily defined.

"The definition changed about two years ago, but is now fixed in the enhancement strategy."

7. Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland, QAA (2006), paragraph 46. Available from: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ institutionalaudit/ handbook2006 /handbookcomments.asp.

5.1.3 To understand the various conceptions of 'enhancement', it is helpful to consider what institutions consider is included within its scope, and what its relationship is to a range of associated concepts such as quality assurance, continuous improvement or good practice.

"The definition is in development, but not in order to produce a strategy."

5.1.4 Although there is variety in the ways institutions see enhancement, this variety is not infinite – there are some common themes, and it is differences of emphasis and balance that mostly distinguish institutional approaches. There are some patterns that have a soft correlation with different institutional types and histories, but these are always subject to exceptions.

5.1.5 In light of this, it may be expected that responses from institutions differ quite considerably. What can be said in general is that there is evidence of almost all institutions giving serious consideration to the idea of enhancement, and in most cases actively and explicitly pursuing an understanding that can be shared across the institution – even if the understanding is that a single definition for the institution would be unhelpful because, as one institution suggests, *"setting a definition of enhancement can act to exclude things"*.

"There is not one single explicit definition [in the institution], but one is emerging. It is implicitly recognised that they are involved in enhancement and they have moved away from QA to QE."

5.1.6 Occasionally an institution has provided a distinctive definition that finds little echo elsewhere in the sector. In one institution, for example, enhancement seems to be defined as the continual refining of existing good practice. In other institutions enhancement may be thought of more as 'fixing things that are wrong'.

"[Enhancement] is understood to be a polishing, and if appropriate a redirecting, of everything that is already good."

5.1.7 These views are not necessarily exclusive, of course, but they do have implications for the way in which the institution addresses quality assurance.

"[QE] is targeting of danger areas – low retention, progression achievement rates – critical external examiner reports – bad feedback from students."

5.1.8 In their responses, most institutions report that their institution has been or is giving active consideration to the meaning of 'enhancement'. In these institutions the process by which development of institutional understanding takes place typically follows one of two broad approaches. These are probably most usefully thought of as two ends of a continuum.

"The institution is now working towards an enhancement strategy and will look to define enhancement in this document."

5.1.9 At one end are institutions that take a deliberate and structured institutional approach to the idea of enhancement. At its most structured and comprehensive, this is clearly something in which the deliberative structures of the university are fully involved. There is an intention to set a direction or framework for the whole institution, often as part of the development of a QE strategy.

"QE as a concept is certainly recognised – however, there is not, as yet, one institutional definition, and this will be as broad-based and helpful as possible."

5.1.10 In these institutions, the development of strategy and process for QE is led by the centre, but with recognition of the difficulty of articulating centre-developed frameworks in ways that can be adopted (or adapted) by academic staff across the range of subjects. Some respondents refer to explicit steps taken in their institutions to engage academic staff in the conversation about enhancement in order to generate ownership of the definition.

5.1.11 At the other end of the spectrum, the process is much more incremental and local, based on a variety of what are perceived to be effective practices developed in different subject contexts. Institutions at this end of the continuum may have, or be developing a range of shaded definitions and concepts of enhancement.

"There has ALWAYS been an inbuilt but perhaps overly implicit anticipation that individual staff, colleges, departments and the university as a whole, are all committed to continuous improvement particularly with regard to teaching."

"There has been no philosophical debate about what is QA/QE/QM – ideas have evolved."

5.1.12   In these institutions, enhancement may typically be thought of as something that those who teach know best how to carry out, with the centre simply providing facilitative support. Development of a concept and strategic approach may be expected to be more implicit than explicit. In this context even the language of enhancement may be avoided, since: *"'Enhancement isn't a word which would be used by academic staff – they talk about learning and teaching itself."*

5.1.13   It may be tempting to think of the former approach as being more typical of post-1992 institutions and the latter of pre-1992. It is indeed easy to find examples that would fit this stereotype, but the data throw up enough exceptions to resist easy stereotyping.

5.1.14   One example of this would be that even where institutional-wide deliberation has been given to defining enhancement, it does not necessarily result in the adoption of a single definition.

"QE is a recognised term, but its use is still evolving across the institution. Therefore there is not one definition."

5.1.15   Several institutions would support the view that: *"QE can mean different things to different groups or areas within the institution, therefore there might be more than one definition adopted."* There is a suggestion in some of these institutions that for institutional audit purposes the definition in the *Handbook for Institutional Audit* is used.

"[The institution] is very resistant to imposing or adopting a single definition of 'enhancement'."

5.1.16   However, for some the question whether one or many definitions is appropriate is being resolved in the opposite direction. In these institutions, the presence of several definitions, each relevant to a particular user group, does not help the shared understanding the institution aspires to, and the institution may need to find a means of achieving this shared understanding. One institution, for example, in its response comments that: *"Whilst different definitions of QE exist within the University, the institution is in the process of working towards a common definition."*[8]

"… the university does not believe that there is a need for one single definition – it believes it has a good understanding of what needs to be done."

8. No further information about the means by which this is to be done is included in the response.

5.2   Enhancement of what?

5.2.1   Only a few responses record whether, and in what way, the institution has explicitly considered the question: 'enhancement of what?'

5.2.2   The general assumption underlying most responses is that QE, as in the QAA definition, refers to the enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities. This is most often interpreted implicitly in the particular sense of the student's experience of learning, teaching and assessment, rather than broader definitions of the students' experience.

"Centrally, QE is regarded as a set of strategic priorities to improve teaching and learning."

5.2.3   Responses to the framework of questions used as a basis for discussions between Liaison Officers and institutions in the project may not, of course, cover the full range of deliberations that institutions have conducted about what should be included within the scope of enhancement – the absence of comment cannot be taken as evidence that deliberation has not taken place. Nonetheless, the absence of any comment in all but a very few responses suggests that there is a possibility that it has largely gone unquestioned.

"… the remit of quality enhancement was debated at length. It was questioned if a definition should include the broader aspects of the student experience such as car parking, finance, etc or be constrained to the wider learning, teaching and curriculum delivery issues?"

5.2.4   There are a very few institutional responses, however, that do indicate that the specific question about what enhancement should cover is one the institution has pondered (illustrated, for example, in the comments quoted in the adjacent column).

5.2.5   In some of these latter institutions, a more limited scope for 'enhancement' has been adopted after discussion, while other institutions, having deliberated, find it impossible to dissociate wider administrative aspects of the student experience from their learning experience and as a consequence are adopting a broader scope for enhancement.

"The University is thinking more widely than enhancing teaching experience, and looking on anything that impacts on student learning, which may cover the administrative framework as well as student support."

5.2.6   Decisions about the scope of quality enhancement have obvious implications for the committee structure and the configuration of support units.

5.3 QE and continuous improvement

5.3.1 HEFCE commonly uses the phrase 'continuous improvement' to describe its expectations in relation to quality enhancement, aiming to support institutions to *"adopt a continuous improvement approach to the learning environment in response to challenges of global competition and the increasing diversity of the student population"*[9].

5.3.2 In particular, 'continuous improvement' is used by HEFCE in relation to the intention of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund: *"The main strategic purpose of this funding is to embed and sustain learning and teaching strategies and activities that have been steadily developing over the last six years to encourage future institutional investment in continuous improvement."* [10]

5.3.3 In the light of this, it is interesting that the phrase 'continuous improvement' is used by fewer than one-fifth of respondents. Where the phrase is used it would mostly seem to be used as a synonym for quality enhancement, sometimes explicitly so. However, 'continuous improvement' as a phrase is never directly associated with strategy in the way that QE is.

5.3.4 It may be that there is not as much clarity in the sector as there could be about how the HEFCE use of 'continuous improvement' might relate to QAA and the Academy use of 'enhancement'.

5.3.5 HEFCE's use of the term in the context of TQEF is also interesting because, as we shall see below, perhaps surprisingly, TQEF is seldom mentioned by respondents.

5.4 Enhancement and 'good practice'

5.4.1 In a similar way, it is interesting to consider how 'good practice' is understood, since this may shed light on the diversity of interpretations of QE.

5.4.2 QAA includes *"the dissemination of good practice"* as one of the aspects of QE that form part of institutional audit[11].

5.4.3 In the context of audit, QAA suggests that 'good practice' is identified as features that: *"make a particularly positive contribution to the institution's approach to the management of the security of academic standards and of the quality of provision in the context of that institution"*.

9. www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/enhance

10. HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Funding arrangements 2006–07 to 2008–09. Available from: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_11

11. Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland, QAA (2006), paragraph 11. Available from: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/handbook2006/handbookComments.asp

5.4.4 However, QAA has also made clear that features of good practice, as defined above, are not automatically linked to a strategic approach to QE at an institutional level. 'Good practice' may arise in other ways: *"A feature of good practice does not necessarily derive from 'taking deliberate steps at institutional level'"*.[12]

12. Ibid., gloss on paragraph 48.

5.4.5 This distinction is reflected by several institutions, whose responses imply that while 'enhancement' is a term that would not necessarily be understood by teaching staff, 'good practice' would be understood and examples could be readily identified across academic departments.

"Enhancement is above and beyond good practice, but good practice is more widespread than enhancement."

5.4.6 There are many references to 'good' practice in the reports of discussions with institutions. They occur in many parts of the responses outwith the specific question that offered an opportunity to comment on it. This supports a view that 'good practice' is a well-used concept in the HE community, but that how well-understood it is as a concept is open to question.

"Good practice is tied into the college's definition of enhancement."

5.4.7 In some institutions, other terms than 'good' are explicitly preferred as alternatives. 'Best practice' appears in three responses, in one case explicitly to mean *"exemplary"* and distinct from good practice; in another case best practice is described as synonymous with good practice[13].

"The University is more comfortable talking about effective practice rather than 'good'."

13. The third occurrence is not easy to interpret.

5.4.8 'Effective' practice is preferred in at least two institutions. The rationale, as formulated by one respondent, is that effective practice "must make a difference, have impact, be sustainable".

"We prefer to use the term 'effective' practice."

5.4.9 This does seem to point to an important distinction – the identification of 'good' practice does not necessarily include a requirement that the practice should have the potential to have a wider impact (although it is often assumed to include this implicitly).

"… good practice is effective practice."

5.4.10 It raises the question of whether there are two conceptualisations of 'good practice' in common use in HE. In one, good practice may be considered to be practice that is commendable, or excellent, through demonstrating effectiveness in its context, without any implication that it should be transferable and capable of improving learning opportunities and/or students' learning experiences in other contexts.

"'Good practice' requires excellence, more than the minimum."

"Good practice is what everyone should be doing. Defines minimum expectation."

5.4.11 In the other conceptualisation, transferability is the key feature in the meaning of 'good practice'. It implies that 'capability of dissemination' is a key feature of good practice. Perhaps these conceptualisations can be thought of as the two ends to a continuum of views, but the present study has insufficient evidence to support this.

"Good practice is practice that is worthy of dissemination."

5.4.12 It is possible that the assumption that there is a shared understanding of good practice within an institution could lead to frustrated expectations. If the term 'good practice' is widely understood by some staff in one way, but in a different way by others, for example, then enhancement that relies on sharing good practice is likely to be less effective.

"Good practice should be something that leads to improvement/ enhancement of the student learning experience."

5.4.13 There is some evidence, from a few institutions, that they are concerned to clarify the different shades of meaning wrapped up in the term 'good practice', and some acknowledgement that this is less simple than might be thought. One institutional respondent hints at a more widespread recognition of the problem, suggesting that a definition of good practice is *"acknowledged to be difficult"*.

5.4.14 A small number of institutions make explicit mention of the value of identifying good practice in other institutions or from the literature, using this as a source of benchmarking. It is a small minority of institutions whose response explicitly comments that good practice may be located outwith the institution itself.

"Good practice is looking at precedence in literature and benchmarking against other institutions, consider the best intelligence available."

5.4.15 Most commonly, however, the term 'good practice' is used in responses as if its meaning is self-evident. It can be inferred, however, that for most respondents good practice includes notions of transferability, and it is this that makes it an important component of enhancement.

5.4.16 Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common usage of good practice in the data is where it is the object of identification, sharing, dissemination or adoption. It is in these ways that good practice is expected to play a part in enhancement.

"A key element of the process of enhancement is the identification and adoption of good practice."

5.4.17 In some institutions, identifying and sharing or disseminating good practice can be inferred to be a core part of enhancement, whereas in others it is merely one aspect.

"QE is based on identification and recognition of good practice."

5.4.18　It is commonly reported that it is often through QA processes that good practice is identified – through monitoring and review, or external examiner reports, for example – and that enhancement follows from sharing or disseminating it.

"Annual course reports have recently been introduced that specifically asked schools to identify examples of good practice."

5.4.19　While many institutions have implicitly followed a process like this for some time, in others (perhaps surprisingly) its introduction seems comparatively recent.

5.4.20　Collecting and disseminating examples of good practice might be expected to lead to enhancement, but (seen from the other end) enhancement is also expected to lead to good (improved) practice.

"… good practice is one outcome of enhancement."

5.4.21　At least two respondents draw attention to a potential danger in identifying enhancement too closely with good practice, because that *"can distract institutions from identifying and tackling weaknesses and seeking to learn from that too".*

"… a focus on identifying good practice and trying to share that can mean weak practice is masked or ignored."

5.4.22　Other problems with the concept of good practice are also acknowledged by a small number of institutions.

5.4.23　The limitations on transferability of practice between different subjects may be noted as making the sharing of good practice problematic. Practices from one subject may actually be inappropriate in another, or may simply be dismissed as inappropriate by individuals or departments resistant to adopting practice from anywhere else. The problems of the 'not invented here' syndrome are noted by a few respondents.

"… 'sharing good practice' is a difficult concept to use at ground level because of the difficulty of subject transferability."

5.4.24　For those with institutional responsibility for quality enhancement, it is often difficult to judge the extent to which transfer of practice really is inappropriate, since they are reliant on the expertise and claims of academic staff from different disciplines. There are similar difficulties in judging claims for good practice in the first place. Clear definitions and criteria of what constitutes 'good practice' do not appear to be common. One respondent emphasised the need for better evidence to support claims of good practice before any thought is given to dissemination or transfer.

"… there must be opportunity to identify when something that is regarded as 'good practice' in one area is not necessarily appropriate in another."

"One problem is the need to avoid recognising good practice 'by assertion'."

5.4.25   Finally, in relation to good practice, there is little acknowledgement in the data that the concept of dissemination and adoption is itself problematic. Having identified good practice, institutions speak frequently of dissemination, with regard to publishing, making available, highlighting etc, but without any evidence of how adoption and impact is to be effected.

5.5   The relation of QE and QA

5.5.1   The data confirm a view that institutions generally see a clear and close relationship between enhancement and assurance, in which the two aspects are necessary and complementary parts of effective quality management. Underlying the relationship, two broad views can be discerned: that QE is part of QA, and that QA is part of QE.

"QA and QE are intrinsically linked throughout the institution."

5.5.2   In one view QE can be seen as a progressive extension of the principles established in QA – QA forms the bedrock on which QE can be safely built. This is vividly described by one institution whose definitions of QA and QE *"are a bit like the differences between the Old and New Testaments"*.

"[QA and QE] were considered separately, but through current work in progress are now becoming linked."

5.5.3   Some institutions prefer a view that QE is (and has always been) the principal purpose, and QA is simply the means of gathering data to monitor enhancement and identify good practice for further enhancement.

5.5.4   Why this may be important is that there is some suggestion that the way the relationship is viewed relates to the ways in which enhancement is approached. For example, for some institutions QA is the only part of the process that produces visible data for scrutiny.

"It is like an iceberg with QA sticking out and can be seen, but with QE as the seven-tenths submerged under water and can't always be seen as clearly."

5.5.5   Most institutions report that QA and QE are still seen as separate, but are becoming more closely linked than they have been in the past. In some institutions the relationship is described as now seen as *"inextricably linked"*, and this is a view commonly reflected in the responses. However, at least one institution *"does not differentiate between quality assurance and quality enhancement"*.

5.6   Attitudes to external scrutiny in relation to QE

5.6.1   Many institutions have a positive view of external scrutiny in relation to assurance, reporting that they see *"no danger in external scrutiny"*. A small number of respondents are explicit about the benefits to QE, in relation to external scrutiny, mostly with regard to how it can help the institution focus its own debates and understanding.

"External scrutiny focuses the mind."

"The external perspective can enhance our objectivity."

5.6.2   However, a larger number of responses identify potential problems with external scrutiny in relation to QE, and in a small number of these institutions, the concern is framed around clear anxieties about the ability of the institutional audit process to adequately scrutinise enhancement.

"External scrutiny has very little role to play in QE, it will cause institutions to be risk-averse."

5.6.3   There is some correlation between concerns about external scrutiny, discomfort with the institutional audit definition of QE (see below) and definitions of enhancement that focus on implicit, local initiatives. Institutions demonstrating this set of responses are more commonly pre-1992 than post-1992, but as in other aspects of this study, this is not an exclusive pattern.

5.6.4   Some of the concern about scrutiny is related to how institutional audit teams could work with the "protean" nature of enhancement – a concern that enhancement itself cannot be made visible to institutional audit in a meaningful way. In at least one institution, while the value of learning from external influence is recognised the respondent is clear that *"from the point of view of the institution there is no need for external scrutiny"*.

5.6.5   Several respondents specifically voice a concern that external scrutiny of QE will create defensiveness in institutions, leading to tactical behaviour that stifles innovation.

"External scrutiny could hinder QE. Especially when QE is so rigidly defined."

5.6.6   One response identifies as a risk that innovations in the institution may be *"rejected by peers in the review process"*. Another institution sees a quite different risk in exposing innovations to external scrutiny: the risk of ideas being stolen.

"The chief risk of external scrutiny is of ideas and/or innovations being taken away to be used in another institution."

5.7 QAA institutional audit definition

5.7.1 The definition of 'enhancement' that QAA offers in the Handbook for Institutional Audit is mentioned by many respondents. In most cases it has been seen as helpful and some institutions have adopted it as an institutional definition to guide their own strategy. There are many references supporting this view.

"The institution has used [the] QAA definition…and feel that it is a useful definition for its purposes."

5.7.2 For some institutions this adoption is wholehearted, with the QAA definition meeting all the needs of an institutional definition.

5.7.3 In other cases adoption appears to be temporary or contingent. In one institution it is described, for example, as *"being used as a tool for focusing the attention of staff on the idea of enhancement"*, while the institution itself is expecting a definition to evolve across the institution.

"The definition of QE is changing and currently the QAA definition has been adopted while discussions are happening."

5.7.4 Some responses have a more sceptical approach, and the QAA definition is accepted with reservations.

5.7.5 This may reflect the perception that definitions of 'enhancement' need to be tailored to individual institutional strategy, but on occasion institutions are specific about aspects of the institutional audit definition with which they are uncomfortable – the notion of 'deliberate steps', for example.

"… the university is not keen on the 'taking deliberate steps' part of the definition for audit – it feels that this sounds like the university is required to do something for the sake of it."

5.7.6 The idea of 'deliberate steps', while welcomed by many institutions, raises concerns for others. One concern is, as one institution reports, that where 'deliberate steps' forms part of the QE definition, academics feel that *"their inputs were being marginalised in favour of top-down managerial 'initiatives'"*. Institutions that have reservations about the appropriateness of 'deliberate steps' as part of their institutional definition of enhancement, may still adopt the audit definition to a degree, where it is convenient to do so.

"The institution quite likes the notion of 'deliberate steps' referred to in the QAA audit definition of enhancement."

"The university uses the QAA definition of QE in its paperwork centrally, but does not push it in the rest of the University as it perceives that it would be resisted."

5.8 QE, risk and innovation

5.8.1 Where it was clearly discussed in the responses, risk was generally conceived of as desirable, in the sense of leaving space to try something new. It was felt that a previous focus on QA had led to a degree of 'risk-averse' behaviours by institutions, which had hindered innovation.

"There is a danger of fossilisation if external scrutiny mitigates [sic] against distinctive approaches and discourages risk-taking/being 'different'."

5.8.2 As has been seen above, similar concerns are voiced by some respondents in relation to the new institutional audit method. However, most institutional responses suggested that the new method offers less incentive to 'play it safe', since the focus on enhancement is seen to create more space for risk. There are no institutions who argue for a return to the previous institutional audit method, with its focus on QA.

5.8.3 Because innovation, valued by all respondents, is not seen as possible without risk, quality enhancement is acknowledged by some respondents as being inherently risky: *"QE is risk and QA mitigates that risk."*

"[The university] regards concepts of risk as intimately tied up with QE."

5.8.4 However, several institutions mentioned the need to manage risk effectively, such as by use of an appropriate evidence base or by recognising different risk levels in different situations. This necessity for balance was summarised by one institution as being *"not risk-averse, just responsible"*.

"… [an essential characteristic of good QE] is a good evidence base to modulate risk."

5.8.5 In relation to risk-based approaches institutions had differing views, some stating that QE was not compatible with a risk-based approach with others having a view that their approach to QE was essentially a risk-based approach (albeit implicitly rather than explicitly).

"The approach to determining the intensity of internal scrutiny of provision should be risk-based."

"Risk-based strategy is not quality enhancement."

5.8.6 There is a suggestion that 'risk-based' in some institutions is assumed only to apply to operational aspects, such as financial risk assessment, and therefore these institutions may not see risk management approaches as relevant to enhancement.

"Risk assessment lies with QA rather than QE and is manifest in activities such as financial planning…"

5.8.7 This could conceivably lead to a situation in which some institutions see QE as having inherent risk involved in it, while not apparently considering that this risk needs to be managed.

"The institution's approach is risk-based in a covert way: internally they know where the risks are, and take suitable measures."

5.8.8 Whatever way they manage the associated risks, almost all institutions are agreed that the encouragement of innovation is at the heart of enhancement, that innovation thrives when risks can be taken and that innovation, risk and enhancement are therefore intimately bound together. There is a need to balance risk so that there is sufficient space for enhancing innovation, but not so much that the quality of the student experience is compromised.

5.8.9 A potential paradox that some institutions point to is that the innovative nature of effective enhancement may elude normal definitions of evidence. A problem that is not discussed in the responses, but may benefit from further consideration within institutions, is the definition of 'innovation' itself.

"… the developmental and innovative side of QE may not lend themselves to an evidence base."

5.9 Top-down or bottom-up definitions?

5.9.1 A theme underlying many responses that related to definitions and concepts of enhancement is the different ways in which the ideas of 'centre' and 'local' or 'top' and 'bottom' might be described. In many institutions, a tension is recognised between strategic thinking and discourse about enhancement at institutional level and the way in which it is conceived or talked about by academic staff in departments.

"The spirit of the University's new approach to enhancement is to support what happens in the faculties not direct them from the centre…"

5.9.2 This may be seen as principally an issue of language – some respondents indicate that the language of enhancement is not naturally used by academic staff, or even suggest that it is alienating in ways which would act as an obstacle to staff 'buying-in' to the ideas of enhancement.

"'Enhancement' isn't a word which would be used by academic staff – they talk about learning and teaching itself."

5.9.3 However, with these few exceptions, there is widespread agreement that the language of enhancement is more easily adopted and signed up to by academic staff than the language of 'assurance', but beyond this there is no agreement about how alternatives such as 'continuous improvement' are understood or appreciated. It is also important to bear in mind that even the language of enhancement is not one that is believed to be readily understood by academic staff.

"The university had a lot to offer at discipline level, but needed to pick it up and make use of it centrally. The new vision was to make clear why QA is done for learning and teaching reasons that it is not just for audit purposes."

5.9.4 Alternatively, some institutions argue that the essence of enhancement is something that happens locally, at the level of academic staff and is an outcome of individual teachers concern for improving teaching. It is further argued that institutional level or strategic approaches should focus purely on being permissive and supportive of this naturally occurring enhancement.

"There is no specific institution-wide definition of enhancement; rather it is seen as something that arises from staff looking at ways to improve the student learning experience through their learning and teaching."

5.9.5   The underlying institutional view of what kind of relationship between central and local (or top and bottom) parts is appropriate in the individual institution is clearly related to how enhancement is conceived, and both in turn to a large extent determine the way in which the institution develops its enhancement strategies.

6   Strategies for QE

6.1   'Taking deliberate steps'

6.1.1   The institutional audit definition of enhancement suggests that there is a strategic aspect to QE – *"taking deliberate steps at institutional level"* – and that the presence of local innovations and good practice, though commendable, does not in itself constitute effective QE in an institution.

6.1.2   QAA does not attempt to prescribe how this strategic approach might look, and the particular form of words has been chosen to be precise, while being flexible enough to allow for a variety of approaches.

6.1.3   The idea of 'deliberate steps' on the whole receives a positive response in the study data, and institutions have clearly taken the opportunity to build their own interpretation of how 'deliberate steps' are best taken in their context.

6.1.4   Among those institutions that are content that 'taking deliberate steps' is appropriate, there is a healthy diversity of approaches to strategy. However, there are some institutions that challenge the concept of a strategic approach, as we shall see below.

6.2   Can enhancement be strategic?

6.2.1   Not all institutions take the view that enhancement can be, or even should be, strategic at institutional level. This view seems to be often associated with conceptions of quality enhancement in which individual academics and departments are assumed to be implicitly and effectively enhancing quality. In these contexts, the place of the institution may be seen as simply to ensure support is available for innovation, or that mechanisms exist to share good practice across departments. QE may be seen more appropriately as being a strategic concern for departments than for the institution.

"The basic principle that the University would hold to is 'enhancement' [however defined] comes from the frontline staff and that the University's need is to achieve an overview of what is taking place at the front-line and provide some University-level steer and support."

6.2.2 The overwhelming majority of institutions, however, accept that a strategic approach, led at institutional level, is valuable, or even necessary. The particular way in which that strategic approach is implemented varies considerably from institution to institution within some broad patterns. Strategic approach is aligned closely to how the institution conceives of enhancement.

6.2.3 As might be expected from Section 5 above, there is also an interesting diversity of views about the extent to which this strategic approach is best built up from local practice or developed from 'top-down'.

6.3   Explicit and implicit

6.3.1 Several respondents make the point that increasing explicitness is the clearest feature of their developing strategies for QE. Associated with this is evidence of a considerable level of recent debate and discussion within institutions about how enhancement is best taken forward.

"At departmental level QE is quite explicit, but is more implicit at institutional level."

6.3.2 For several institutions, a change of focus from assurance to enhancement is taking place in incremental steps, and making explicit what has previously been implicit is a deliberate strategic step for some. For others it seems to be more a matter of evolution or growth.

"QE is now built into institutional strategies with faculties being involved at all stages – so it is explicit at institutional level, implicit at faculty level."

6.3.3 This explicitness may be increasing at different levels of the institution. In some cases it would seem that enhancement is more explicit at institutional level than at local level, in others the reverse is claimed.

"[QE] is both implicit [the institutional instinct] and increasingly explicit."

6.3.4 Not all institutions are concerned to make enhancement more explicit at every level. For some, it is clearly felt to be appropriate, for example, that enhancement remains largely implicit at departmental level, reflecting a view that improving learning and teaching is something that academic staff are continually engaged in without thinking of it as 'enhancement'.

6.4 Approaches to developing strategy

6.4.1 There is evidence that institutions are taking different approaches to strategy- and policy-making in relation to QE. This can be seen to be related to the variety of ways in which institutions normally approach strategy-making, the history of quality management in the institution, or the institutional size and complexity – monotechnic or specialist institutions, for example, are often clear about having an approach that is different from the mainstream and that reflects their specialist mission.

"QE activity will be driven from the centre, the L&T Strategy defines actions for the institution. This is possible at a small institution because of the culture."

6.4.2 Post-2005 institutions are often in a position where their strategic approach to quality is relatively recent, having been thoroughly revised at the time of their taking full responsibility for academic standards and awards.

6.4.3 There is general agreement that it is important to get ownership of strategies by academic and other staff, but some institutions have a greater expectation of the way in which individuals and departments can and should contribute to the institutional aspiration.

"The university tends to adopt a 'bottom-up' approach to the development of policy and practice."

6.4.4 Some respondents highly value a bottom-up approach, and have substantial concerns about the effectiveness of top-down policies, to the extent that they may be dismissive of institutional level strategies at all. This is most often associated with claims of implicit enhancement approaches already existing among academic staff, and may be most commonly, but not exclusively, reported in pre-1992 institutions.

"The University does not have a single strategy, and it has entrusted identifying routes to enhancement to the schools."

6.4.5 Other respondents report greater caution about the effectiveness of solely bottom-up approaches. The most common attitude that can be observed in the responses is that strategy and policy are best led and guided from the top, but that particular care needs to be taken to ensure that they are meaningful and owned by staff 'at the chalkface'.

"… we would regard reliance on bottom-up developments to improve our provision as inadequate."

6.4.6 Given the institutional audit guidance on enhancement as a deliberate and strategic concern at institutional level, it might be expected that institutions will seek to develop an enhancement strategy in which to define the institutional approach.

"There is a formal QE strategy; this is designed to build upon an established sound and institution-wide QA base."

6.4.7 Some institutions, a small minority, have indeed taken this route, while a few more are tentatively exploring the development of a distinct QE strategy.

"The University's Quality Enhancement Strategy is its first go."

6.4.8 It is more likely to be post-1992 than pre-1992 institutions that take this direction, but even the majority of post-1992 institutions do not intend to have a separate QE strategy. The reasons why some institutions choose a separate strategy route are, unfortunately, not made clear by the data.

"The University has explicitly decided not to have a separate QE policy, strategy or plan."

6.4.9 In some cases, respondents have been very explicit about not having a separate QE strategy, but seldom give insights into their rationale. The development of a separate QE strategy is a far less common approach than integrating enhancement into other strategies, principally quality management or learning and teaching strategies (or both).

"The University has not gone down road of a QE strategy and will probably not go down this road. [It] believes that enhancement should be embedded, for instance, in the teaching and learning strategy…"

6.5 Relation of QE to quality strategies or learning and teaching strategies

6.5.1 Many respondents stress the relationship of QE to assurance (see above), and consequently it is not unexpected to discover that a number of institutions frame QE within a quality or quality management strategy.

"The Quality Assurance Strategy defines aims and objectives – the institution is aiming for enhancement-led quality assurance."

6.5.2 Institutions taking this route are often characterised by having distinct quality management or assurance committees and offices (although institutions with distinct committees and offices do not necessarily have distinct quality-focused strategies). A comparatively small proportion of respondents describe this approach to strategy.

"We don't have a QE strategy, but we do have a Quality Strategy."

6.5.3 The large majority of all responding institutions embed the strategic approach to quality enhancement into a learning and teaching strategy or equivalent. In some cases this is a refinement of a relatively long-established approach – perhaps concerned to make the QE aspects of an existing learning and teaching strategy more explicit. In some institutions a substantial revision of the learning and teaching strategy may have taken place more clearly to embed QE within it.

"The University has a new learning and quality strategy with a focus on enhancement and the student learning experience."

"… as the L&T Strategy 2006-10 was being devised, more serious thought was given to the joining up of QA and QE."

"We're revising our LTA Strategy at the moment and QE is explicit in this."

6.5.4 It can be inferred in all these institutions that quality enhancement refers to the quality of learning, teaching (and assessment), but not necessarily to wider concerns.

6.5.5 We have seen above that some institutions wish to look at enhancement of the student experience in a very broadly defined way; for example, with regard to social opportunity, catering etc. Institutions with such a broad definition would perhaps be likely to find a tension in having a strategic approach to enhancement embedded mainly in learning and teaching context.

6.5.6 Learning and teaching strategies have been in place in English institutions since at least 1999 and have been supported by HEFCE during that time. There have also been a number of reviews and enquiries into strategic approaches to learning and teaching during that time. There has therefore been time and support to refine these strategies.

6.5.7 Over time learning and teaching strategies have become increasingly concerned with encouraging and prioritising change and improvement in pedagogy. It is therefore quite appropriate that they should be the site of institutions' strategic aspirations for the enhancement of teaching quality.

6.5.8 It is interesting to note that while references to learning and teaching strategies are very common in the responses received (n=41), institutions that refer to the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund are quite rare (n=9). Given that the TQEF is a significant resource provided to institutions to support their learning and teaching strategy, it is perhaps odd that so few institutional respondents should mention it (see below).

6.6 Relationship to other strategies

6.6.1 There is comparatively little reference to other strategies in the responses. Occasionally reference is made to human resources or staff development strategies.

6.6.2 Several institutions hint that quality enhancement impacts on, or has links with, other strategies in the institution. Some, particularly those that stress the view that a single QE strategy is inappropriate, explicitly make the point that QE is integrated into all strategies.

"… the estates strategy is being integrated with the education strategy (better learning environment for students). The research strategy is informing the education strategy etc."

6.7   Relation to corporate plans

6.7.1   A small number of respondents specifically relate their strategies for enhancement to the institution's corporate or business plan, or to institutional business processes such as the use of Key Performance Indicators. The respondents are from both pre- and post-1992 institutions, suggesting that an easy identification of a more business-oriented approach with post-1992 institutions should be avoided, but the numbers of responses is too small to draw any further conclusions.

"The institution's strategic plan is the main driver."

6.7.2   However, given the increasing pressure on institutions to ensure that they are governed and managed in a 'business-like' way, it is perhaps interesting to note that the links between the business strategies and the QE strategies are mentioned so seldom by our respondents.

7   QE structures and processes

7.0.1   The structures and processes through which enhancement is led, determined and supported vary between institutions in ways which reflect the institutions' definitions of enhancement and strategic approaches. Respondents from several institutions report how these structures and processes are changing, and they are often the most visible sign of changing focus in quality management.

7.0.2   There are a range of structures that might be thought of as connected to QE/QA. These include arrangements for leadership, committee and deliberative structures, and offices and units concerned with the administration or support of quality and teaching enhancement functions. There is evidence of institutions making changes in all of these. Usually if an institution changes one of these kinds of structures, then there will be consequent change in all of them.

"… the University has merged three support services … The new service… will concentrate more on quality enhancement than quality assurance."

7.1 Leadership of QE

7.1.1 In all institutions there is a senior person with responsibility for quality enhancement. Leadership of QE developments at institutional level is usually at pro-vice-chancellor (PVC) or equivalent level, but the title varies, reflecting the size and complexity of the institution. Several institutions are at pains to point out that everybody is responsible for quality enhancement and the role of the most senior figure is to lead the process.

"Until recently L&T and quality strategies were overseen by different PVCs, as were the academic development unit and the quality office. This is no longer the case and the change has been found to be helpful."

7.1.2 The highest level of responsibility is usually carried by a PVC (or occasionally deputy VC or vice principal) with a brief for all academic or educational matters. In one institution, the Vice-Chancellor had experience of instituting an enhancement framework at another institution and, consequently (it is inferred), is taking a more hands-on approach than might otherwise be expected.

7.1.3 As an indication of how the leadership in institutions varies, the range of PVC titles referred to by respondents includes:

• PVC Learning and Teaching
• PVC Education
• PVC Academic Affairs
• PVC for the Student Experience
• PVC Learning and Quality
• PVC Learning and Student Experience
• PVC Development.

The range of roles is similar in institutions where titles such as Heads or Directors are used.

7.1.4 Each of these variations reflects the way in which the institution thinks of quality and enhancement. In institutions where a senior figure with a learning and teaching title is cited, there is very often a senior quality role as well. Some institutions have brought these responsibilities more closely together – hence titles referring to 'Learning and Quality' or 'the Student Experience'.

"Leadership for QE is located with PVC L&T and with Head of QA. In committees it's located in our QA Committee and L&T Committee. We're likely to merge these two committees into one."

7.1.5 Below the primary leadership level, others with leadership roles are often referred to in the data. There may be separate people with operational responsibility for learning and teaching and for quality (for example, a Head of Learning and Teaching and a Head of Quality), or there may be a single person with responsibility for both learning and teaching, and quality. This level of leadership often includes managing an institutional office or unit.

"There is an expectation that the University's Learning and Teaching Co-ordinators will be more proactive in taking forward the drive for continuous improvement."

7.1.6 The institutions that fit least well into this general picture are the specialist colleges and conservatoires. Here, their relatively small size and relative narrowness of curricular concerns clearly influence the scale and scope of leadership and management roles.

7.1.7 In larger institutions, responsibility for implementing the enhancement agenda is further devolved to schools or faculties, most commonly to a dean or an associate dean (or equivalent), supported by appropriate departmental groups or committees concerned with learning and teaching, or quality, or both.

"The heads of school play a key role responding to QA and QE agenda."

7.1.8 In one case, leadership is *"located initially in informal practitioner's forums"*. The way in which this works is not clear, but it seems to be an entirely bottom-up process, in which practitioner's forums feed into departmental academic boards, at which a VP Teaching and Learning is present to provide an institutional steer.

"There is an active 'quality community' in the faculties and departments which meets very regularly."

7.1.9 The importance of local leadership and structures is emphasised in several responses, because of its closeness to the realities of teaching, learning and assessment practices.

"Recent changes in title and new positions… include… introduction of five principal lecturers for quality enhancement [of L&T] at school level."

7.2 Deliberative structures

7.2.1 QE is the focus of a variety of deliberative structures, most commonly as a remit of committees focused either on quality, or on teaching and learning.

7.2.2 In pre-1992 universities, the principal committee concerned with teaching quality enhancement is most often a teaching and learning or education committee. In at least one case responsibility is shared with a QA committee.

"QE fits into three senate committees: academic standards, academic development and L&T development committee. There is also a student experience committee."

"[The university] has a QE Committee. The QE Committee has two sub-committees: quality procedures; enhancement outcomes and strategies"

7.2.3 In many post-1992 institutions teaching and learning and quality committees remain separate, but in a few institutions the committee structure is changing to reflect a more integrated approach to teaching and quality enhancement – particularly in those few institutions that have an explicit QE strategy. At least one institution has instituted a specific QE committee to oversee its QE strategy.

7.2.4 In one institution there is a recently-formed QE board, but its role appears to be focused on overseeing major projects such as CETLs – quality and learning teaching committees remain in place.

7.2.5 However, the most common committee arrangement remains separate committees focused on quality and on teaching and learning. The ways in which either or both of these committees address enhancement in each institution is usually aligned with that institution's view of, broadly, whether enhancement is principally a quality matter or a learning and teaching issue. It also generally reflects where leadership is located.

"The Quality Assurance Committee is still separate from the Learning and Teaching Committee, which works well in practice, because they are very different in tone."

7.2.6 Most commonly, both committees are involved in consideration of enhancement, in complementary ways. In one institution, for example, enhancement is *"being driven by the QA Committee and being implemented by both the QA and the Teaching Committee"*.

7.2.7 In some cases, however, the QA-focused committee is described as principally dealing with *"routine QA business"*, and strategic direction rests with an education policy committee.

7.2.8 The relationship between such committees may be facilitated by having the same chair, or by being serviced by a common office, or having overlapping membership, or may be assumed to need no specific facilitation arrangements.

"The PVC [Learning and Student Experience] leads on quality enhancement. He chairs the Quality Assurance Committee and the Teaching Assessment and Learning Committee."

7.2.9 It is obvious that change to the committee structure is occurring in many institutions, sometimes rapidly, sometimes in a more measured way. In broad terms, this change involves a reconsideration of the place and relationship of quality and learning and teaching matters.

7.3 Support for enhancement

7.3.1 Institutions have organised the support for quality assurance and quality enhancement in a variety of ways. There is a broad pattern of relationship between institutional conceptions of quality and enhancement.

7.3.2 In institutions in which enhancement is seen as most closely linked to assurance, for example, there may be a strong quality-focused office, but no central support for the development of learning and teaching.

"At our institution there's always been a QE office. QA is seen as the basis for all QE."

7.3.3 Paradoxically, this model may also be found in institutions that espouse a view that enhancement is implicitly part of teaching, possibly because in these institutions there is a perception that central provision for learning and teaching enhancement is seen as inappropriate.

7.3.4 Most institutions have a central office that supports the management and development of quality. In the survey data this is most often a free-standing office with a title such as Quality Unit, Quality Support Unit or Academic Quality Support, but in some institutions it is a section of the academic registry or equivalent academic service. This arrangement is particularly likely in smaller institutions. The quality office is likely to be well-established, with substantial experience of supporting QA procedures.

"The Quality Support Section within Registry leads on supporting QA, while enhancement is supported by the Centre for Learning Development."

7.3.5 Arrangements for the support of teaching enhancement are less clear, with greater variety and, in some cases, less formality. In most post-1992 institutions (and in a few pre-1992) there has been a unit or centre concerned with providing advice, guidance and support on the enhancement of learning, teaching and assessment. These commonly have titles such as Centre for Learning Development, Centre for Learning and Teaching, Centre for Academic Practice or Academic Development and Practice Unit, and are staffed with a range of professional expertise (which often explicitly includes e-learning expertise).

"In the University overall, quality management sits with the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Office."

"… the work of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, which is seen as a powerful tool for enhancement."

7.3.6 In some institutions it is more common to find a forum or group, such as a Forum for Innovation in Teaching and Learning Support or a Learning and Teaching Research Group, as the focus for sharing ideas and practice about effective teaching.

7.3.7　There is clear evidence in the data that some institutions have seen it as appropriate to merge the functions of these two types of support unit. However, this change is less widespread than the project team anticipated, there being fewer than ten examples clearly identified in the responses.

"The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit has recently been created out of a merger of the relevant administrative offices and the former Centre for Learning and Teaching."

7.3.8　Interestingly two institutions mention the value of a unit (e.g. a Business Information Process Group) as a source of data for quality monitoring and analysis to support enhancement. Given the growing importance of quantitative performance indicators as evidence (see below), it could be anticipated that units of this sort could become increasingly common.

7.3.9　In addition to central support units, some institutions refer also to the importance of support groups at local level, such as forums, working parties and networks, which are claimed as having particular value because of their local alignment.

"Directors of Studies lead changes at the implementation level, e.g. through bids for funding from the Teaching Development Fund."

7.3.10　Respondents also mention the value of development funds for enhancement, disbursed within the institution for projects or initiatives. In some cases these were substantial projects, while in others small amounts were made available to individuals.

"The main thrust of the University's approach to enhancement is through supporting initiatives."

7.4　TQEF support

7.4.1　Institutions may provide the resource for initiatives like those outlined above from core budget, or they may be funded from the institution's TQEF fund – only one institution is explicit about that.

"Funds from TQEF are being given to faculties to develop student-led learning."

7.4.2　TQEF has been provided to institutions annually for almost ten years as a special fund to support the institutions' strategies for the enhancement of learning and teaching. Over 60 of the institutions in our survey will have received TQEF funds. Only nine institutional respondents refer to TQEF at all, making between them a total of 14 comments. This is a surprisingly small number of references. In the light of this it is interesting to unpack the data in a little more detail.

"TQEF funds have also been used by the Academic Quality Unit to evaluate the University's quality assurance processes and to develop ways of monitoring enhancement."

7.4.3　The most commonly made reference to TQEF is as a source of project funds available for innovation (n=3). In three institutions, reference is made to how TQEF has contributed to building a strategic approach and structures to support to learning and teaching. In two institutions, TQEF is cited simply as one of the drivers that contributed to change. In one institution, TQEF is cited as the source of funding used for a research project into the student experience.

"Yes, the institution is changing its approach as a result of audits, TQEF and so on."

7.4.4　One institution, interestingly, referred to the HEFCE requirement that institutions undertake a self-evaluation of the impact of TQEF, and felt that this would be one way of evaluating the impact of enhancement.

7.4.5　It might be considered disappointing that TQEF, and the need to evaluate its impact, has not been seen by the majority of respondents as relevant to their approach to enhancement. Almost all institutional responses have several references to learning and teaching (or teaching and learning) and at least 41 make explicit reference to a learning and teaching strategy.

7.4.6　This unexpected result might be an artefact of the enquiry method. It is conceivable that generally within institutions the links between QE, L&T and TQEF are not recognised. It is perhaps more likely that the institutional respondents, selected through QAA liaison contacts, might characteristically be people whose main responsibility is quality rather than learning and teaching. These respondents would be likely to be aware of L&T strategies in their institution, but perhaps less aware of the relationship of these to TQEF. As a consequence, perhaps the contribution of TQEF to the support of quality enhancement has been rather undersold in this enquiry.

"The University is presently reflecting on what to do when TQEF ends in terms of what posts needed to be funded across the University to provide quality enhancement and staff support."

7.5　CETLs and their contributions to QE

7.5.1　Several responding institutions are hosts to CETLs, and 12 of them made reference to their own institutional CETL as a source of support in some way for QE in the institution. This support might take the form of stimulating debate and policy discussion about particular aspects of the student experience, or relating to the CETL expertise, or more commonly, regarding more practical use of CETL funds and resources to help with educational or curriculum improvement. CETLs can also help to build networks.

"The CETLs are also viewed as a driver for discussions around QE – they are seen as recognition of the university's commitment to improving the students' learning experience."

7.5.2　In at least one case a CETL is embedded in the university QE process, in which there is a recently established *"Quality Directorate which works in partnership with colleagues in the Directorate of Teaching and Learning and the CETL to manage the quality assurance and enhancement processes".*

"The CETLs have lots of links across the University, but so far not up into the policy-making levels of the institution."

7.5.3　This level of embedding may still be unusual, particularly given the relative stage of development of the CETLs. In one case, the relationship of the institution's CETLs to its quality enhancement agenda was *"not clear at present".* It might be expected that the degree of influence of CETLs on their host institution will grow over the next two years, as they mature.

"The CETL works through a network of faculty-based fellows and has helped to support the development of another network of learning technology champions."

7.6　Relation of QE to other quality processes

7.6.1　Virtually all institutions claim strong links between quality assurance and enhancement processes. They are variously described as 'interlinked', 'closely linked', 'strongly linked', 'intrinsically linked', 'intertwined', 'inseparable' and 'integrated'. In some cases the links are *"so inextricable that the university would deny the need for QE 'processes' as such".* There is evidence of considerable deliberation taking place within institutions to review and revise the QA/QE relationship.

"The university has moved to an improvement-led approach to periodic review."

7.6.2　A few institutions report that although they aspire to integrated processes, they are not yet at that position. One institution regards them as explicitly separate processes.

7.6.3　However the links are described, there is general agreement about the nature of the relationship. In this dominant model of the linkage, assurance processes produce outcomes that drive enhancement activities, which in turn are monitored by assurance processes, in a cyclical way.

"As an institution we have always had an expectation that quality enhancement should emerge from effective quality assurance processes."

7.6.4　The relevant assurance processes that institutions cite as contributing to QE include all the familiar processes of QA: validation and re-validation; monitoring and review activities; external examiner commentary; and reviews of university priority themes (for example, as identified by institutional audit).

7.6.5　In some cases respondents refer to increasingly 'enhancement-led' or 'improvement-led' QA processes. Although little detail is provided about what this might look like, it is possible to infer that in an enhancement-led approach the purpose of scrutiny in assurance would be explicitly to identify opportunities for enhancement. As we have seen above, this might mean identifying practice that is deemed below an acceptable threshold, as well as identifying 'good' practices – i.e. those that are effective and that other parts of the institution might be persuaded to adopt.

"The university believes that its QA processes [such as periodic review] should lead to enhancement and also to the identification of good practice."

7.6.6　Many of the responses imply that the links between QA and QE processes are obvious and longstanding, and that the purpose of QA has always been recognised to be as a source for enhancement actions. Yet at the same time there is clear evidence from many institutions that the links between assurance and enhancement need further development.

"[QA and QE processes] should be linked but are currently separate."

"QA and QE are linked through a cycle of review and improvement."

7.6.7　If the sector agrees with the view of one institution that *"quality assurance would have no point if it didn't have this [enhancement] output",* while at the same time a large part of the sector can be seen to be very actively building the links and structures to achieve that output, it raises an uncomfortable question about what all the QA processes have been doing prior to strong links being in place.

"They are becoming increasingly linked. For example, departments are required to produce improvement plans as a function of QA."

8　Evidence, data and statistics

8.1　The place of evidence

8.1.1　Many institutions make reference to the reliance of effective enhancement on the availability of appropriate evidence. A few speak specifically of 'evidence-based' approaches to QE, which are either in place or development.

"The University is developing a culture of evidence-based/ evidence-informed practice."

8.1.2　'Evidence-based' is currently a fashionable term in HE discourse, and so it would be interesting to uncover a little of what lies behind it. This study did not reveal very much to clarify what institutions mean when they become, or are 'evidence-based', and further exploration of this question might be valuable.

"The aim is to adopt evidence-based approaches that are speedy, streamlined and timely. To this end we are seeking to define quality indicators that are quantitative and against which the progress of programmes can be quickly assessed."

8.1.3 It may also be worth reflecting on the view of one respondent that *"the developmental and innovative side of QE may not lend themselves to an evidence base"*.

8.2 Concepts of evidence in QE and QA

8.2.1 Evidence is used in two slightly different (but related) meanings in the context of enhancement. In some cases, respondents are keen to identify the use of evidence to judge whether enhancement has been effective – a sort of assurance of the effectiveness of enhancement practices.

"The process is designed to be forward-looking and improvement-led through reflection on evidence."

8.2.2 In its other usage, evidence refers to what is learnt from assurance processes in order to drive enhancement. These concepts of evidence might be thought of as simply two ways of looking at the same thing, but the way in which institutions use them can be interpreted, in association with responses to other questions, as different ways in which institutions view the enhancement agenda.

"Good QE is characterised… by action based on evidence."

8.2.3 One response characterises the way in which a more evidence-based approach is associated with a change of focus from assurance to enhancement: *"through a move from an emphasis on routine monitoring to more in-depth discussion of issues based on systematic review of evidence"*.

"Enhancement is, at present, too woolly and undefined, it is implicit and it is therefore difficult to drag into the evidential world."

8.2.4 It seems that the survey data reflect a developing understanding in some institutions of how the data produced as an outcome of monitoring can best be used as 'evidence' on which to base enhancement – QA as evidence for QE. For some institutions this understanding has (or is claimed to have) been longstanding, while in others it is fresh and carries with it a certain sense of liberation, since it gives purpose and direction to the monitoring process.

"The University is constantly reflecting and reviewing its own practice, with much evidence placed on evidence-based decision making. Such evidence includes data on student progression, student feedback and student awards."

8.2.5 Where institutions seek evidence from assurance to lead their enhancement activity, they may do so within different frames. There are those institutions, for example, as we have seen, that principally seek to identify 'unsatisfactory' practice in order to improve it, and other institutions that seek to identify what is good already.

"Through report cycles a build-up of evidence reaches a point of quality enhancement, that it is right for other people in the institution to know about something."

8.2.6 Some institutions have now included within the quality monitoring processes, a question where staff *"are asked to comment on/provide evidence of enhancement through teaching and learning"*.

8.2.7 Student feedback is an important source of evidence cited by institutions. This is collected routinely as part of quality monitoring, but some institutions also use other mechanisms such as internal surveys, or use of focus groups of students to develop qualitative understanding of particular aspects of their experience. One institution notes the use of focus groups to follow up NSS findings (see section on student involvement below).

8.2.8 These other ways of gathering evidence may be particularly helpful where an institution wishes to explore a broader definition of the student experience than is addressed by learning and teaching feedback.

8.3 Evidence from statistics and information systems

8.3.1 What is clear in the responses is the increasing importance of statistical data as an indicator of performance, and the consequent importance of good, reliable and accessible management information systems. Several respondents report recent improvements to information systems, but this remains a work in progress in some institutions.

"In annual monitoring the process now focuses on identifying 'headlines' and using statistics."

"The MIS was not sufficiently well-developed [three years ago]."

"Impact is measured through data analysis, reflection and qualitative analysis, and performance indicators, where appropriate."

8.3.2 A focus on developing the means to generate and use quantitative performance indicators is found in both pre- and post-1992 institutions

8.3.3 The kinds of data that respondents refer to include statistics on retention, marks distribution, degree classifications and tariff points.

8.3.4 At least one institution acknowledges a difficulty with the use of statistical data. If one aim of QE is to recognise and build on good practice, that may not be readily captured by information systems gathering data at institutional level. The respondent notes that *"success in some parts of the institution can easily be swallowed up in the statistics for the whole institution"*.

"The University is improving its internal data management so it can find out more about how they are doing."

8.4 The use of external data

8.4.1 Many of the institutional responses refer to the NSS as an important external dataset for quality enhancement, described by one respondent as *"now a critical measure"*. NSS is cited as one of the range of measures used for QE in over 40 institutional responses.

8.4.2 The potential impact of the NSS on an institution's reputation gives it a particular significance for some institutions. Doing well (or at least better) in the NSS has become a performance issue for several institutions. When performance in the NSS is perceived to be such a high-stakes indicator, there is a danger that it drives the same kinds of instrumental responses that were frequently a criticism of QA-led institutional audit.

8.4.3 It is clear that an increasing amount of resource is being used to analyse NSS data and its trends. In addition to statistical analysis, the NSS findings are followed up with focus groups in a number of institutions. The findings can be seen as a source of potential problem indicators identifying where something may need to be further investigated (and subsequently improved). Over time, the survey is also a useful source of evidence that enhancements may be working.

8.4.4 NSS findings are often followed up by focused internal surveys or by use of student focus groups. There is a suggestion that as the NSS becomes more familiar, it is increasingly being used at departmental level, rather than simply at institutional level.

8.4.5 However, in some responses the limitations of the NSS are also highlighted. A few institutions continue to run their own surveys, because it provides them with more appropriate information for their needs; for example, by including areas of professional services that the NSS excludes. At least two institutions are developing new internal surveys.

"Impact can be seen through NSS results and internal student evaluations."

"The University makes use of the NSS at institutional level – the amount of engagement at departmental level is less established, but the University is working on this."

"There is no doubt that its impact has made the NSS something we pay very close attention to. A big stick!"

"For the past five years the university has had a Student Experience Questionnaire, which is analysed at University, school and programme level."

"… [a new survey] which has a focus on student support and academic feedback in response to the outcomes of NSS surveys."

"However, institutional surveys provide greater depth and better information in some ways than the NSS."

8.4.6 One important source of external data that informs enhancement, cited by many respondents, is the external examiner. External examiners are one of the aspects of QA systems that institutions use both to identify good practice and to highlight areas where improvement can be made. Institutions vary in the degree of importance they place on either or both of these functions in relation to enhancement. Most commonly, external examiners' comments are reported to be one of the main ways in which good practice is identified. For some institutions, the outcomes of the external examiners' comments seem to be considered to be largely of local value – to the relevant programme or department. In other institutions there are processes by which comments and themes are analysed, collated and shared across the institution.

"External examiner reports are analysed for emerging themes of good and weak practice."

8.4.7 There is evidence that as part of deliberating about the further embedding of QE, some institutions are reviewing how external examiners' comments can contribute most effectively. It may be that for some of these institutions the role of the external examiner has previously been framed principally as a contribution to the assurance of standards, and its potential as a contribution to enhancement has not yet been developed.

"The University is now thinking about how to analyse and share findings from its external examiners' reports across the institution."

8.4.8 With regard to other sources of external data, it is interesting to note that there is little, if any, reference to evidence derived from the literature as a source of evidence-based enhancement.

8.4.9 This may seem a little strange, given the extensive literature available to institutions, the normal academic practice of seeking what has already been written on a subject, and the fact that evidence-based enhancement in medicine and health practice relies heavily on its literature base. If enhancement is to be genuinely evidence-based, might not this evidence base have a larger part to play than it appears to do at present?

9   Student involvement in QE

9.1   There has never been a time in which student involvement in the quality of their educational experience has been higher on the agenda. In the light of this, and the experience of involving students in Scotland's enhancement-led approach to quality including the Enhancement-led institutional review method in Scotland[14], the project team was interested to explore the extent to which institutions in England and Northern Ireland might be engaging students in QE, above and beyond the comprehensive use of student feedback.

"Students are currently involved in QE in a limited way through the standard QA mechanisms."

"… approval and review panels always meet students."

14. www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/ scotlandstudent.asp

9.2   All the institutions that participated in the project acknowledge the primary importance of the student voice in relation to enhancement. Principally, this is heard in the quality monitoring elements of QE, when student views are sought, and the procedures for this are very well-established across the sector.

"Students participate in internal reviews by providing feedback on their experiences, but do not participate as panel members."

9.3   The opportunity to listen to, and act on the student voice is clearly embedded as a routine part of QA and QE through student feedback processes and student representation on programme or course committees. For many institutions, representation is also extended to a range of institutional committees, and additional ways of gathering student views, such as questionnaires, surveys and focus groups are used.

"A member of the student union is a member of each panel established to conduct a Quality Enhancement Audit."

9.4   Student representatives routinely participate in review and validation and audit events, to give their views about the provision to the relevant panels. Increasingly, it seems, students are included on working groups looking at specific student experience issues, such as induction.

"Students are members of periodic review teams as full and equal members."

"Students are increasingly being used on a range of internal QA panels for monitoring and review."

9.5   The data included at least five institutions that now involve students on panels for reviews or similar quality audit processes. Others have considered it, and one response highlights some issues that may need to be addressed if the initiative is to be successful.

9.6   The involvement of students as panel members has the potential for raising anxieties among some academic staff. While there is widespread acceptance of the need to take account of student views, some regard a student role in quality panels, and the searching questions they ask, with some anxiety.

"A proposal that students be involved in validation and review panels provoked some anxiety among staff, as such panels can drill deep down into staff performance and effectiveness."

9.7 Another concern, echoed in a number of responses is the difficulty of getting good quality student input into processes. Several institutions express a certain frustration that they would like to have a higher level and quality of student involvement than they do.

9.8 All of these institutions are taking steps to try to improve the situation; for example, by appointing a student representative officer to encourage student involvement, or by looking to learn from other institutions, or by developing an annual student conference, or by improved training for student representatives.

10 External support for enhancement

10.1 The number of responses that refer to external sources of support for QE are more limited than anticipated.

10.2 The Higher Education Academy is referred to in 15 of the responses. Several of these report the Academy accreditation arrangements as part of their QE focus; in one case the number of Academy Fellows counting as an institutional level indicator. The Academy funding is welcomed in some of the responses, as is the resourcing of the Change Academy, and the PVC Network. None of these receive more than a single mention.

10.3 Two institutions suggest other ways in which the Academy might contribute further (see comments in adjacent column).

10.4 Three institutions referred to Subject Centres in relation to enhancement, one of them remarking that *"the university could make greater use of the Subject Centres"*. In two other institutions, interactions between staff and Subject Centres were seen as valuable, although limited and variable.

10.5 QAA is mentioned in all the responses, most commonly in relation to its role in institutional audit, and in raising the enhancement agenda. There is some reference to learning from institutional audit publications and some evidence that institutions have familiarised themselves with the ELIR approach as a means of helping institutional thinking about enhancement.

"Perhaps putting institutions into small groups so that two to three institutions can learn together about QE. This would be a project for the Academy."

"… [how to evaluate impact] – this an area where we see scope for and would welcome support from the Academy/HEFCE."

10.6   In the responses, there are no references made to CETLs hosted in other institutions as a support for enhancement. Although there might be some expectation that CETLs would be seen to be contributing across the sector in this way, this particular finding might be interpreted to reflect the fact that in general CETLs have not yet reached the stage of their plans when impact across the sector is likely. As has been seen above, institutions are making use of their own CETLs as part of their approach to enhancement.

11   Challenges, obstacles, barriers

11.1   The project discovered a number of ways in which institutions view challenges or obstacles to enhancement.

11.2   One of the most cited areas is the matter of staff perceptions of QE and QA, and their level of buy-in. As noted above, some of this is language-related, and the language of assurance is seen as particularly difficult. Several institutions refer to the challenge of engaging busy academics in QE. This may be particularly the case in institutions where there exists an assumption that enhancement is something that teachers do implicitly, and the rationale for any change is not generally accepted or understood.

"One of the challenges to effective QE is the allocation of resources, particularly human resources."

"Individual schools have a lot of autonomy and differing practice which provides challenges to embedding institutional policies and practice."

11.3   The issue of buy-in to an approach that may be perceived as top-down is more difficult where strong and distinctive departmental cultures exist, or where devolution of responsibility is well-established. Devolution in itself brings the challenge, as seen by some institutions, of ensuring a systematic, institutional implementation, since monitoring centrally is more difficult. Reference is made by several respondents to an associated challenge: resistance to change or to the adoption of practice from elsewhere. Institutions note the importance of good communication and support to overcome resistance to change.

"One of the challenges is that the centre needs to be able to communicate its approach, without undermining the ownership felt at a local level."

"It can be a challenge to insist on the prioritisation of QE in teaching in the face of the various competing demands on operational staff."

11.4 Many respondents raise the issue of insufficient time and other resources as a significant challenge. The time of academics, already under pressure from a number of demands, is in short supply for any new initiatives. The processes associated with quality take time and resources centrally as well; when desirable enhancements are identified there is a question about how to resource them.

11.5 Risk of damage to standards is identified as a challenge, as is risk of enhancement not working (which is made more challenging by resource constraints and the absence of rigorous ways of evaluating impact).

11.6 Some respondents express regret that students are not as engaged as the institutions would wish (see above), since that makes the enhancement task more difficult.

"… in pursuing the University's enhancement agenda, it was acknowledged that there had been some resistance to the concept itself (along the lines of teaching coming naturally to academics)."

12 Conclusions

12.1 The project set out to explore, and reflect back to the HE community in England and Northern Ireland, how ideas of quality enhancement were being developed and implemented across the sector.

12.2 Some very broad generalisations can be made, but the sector is diverse, and will approach enhancement in a range of different ways, and patterns are therefore not rigid. Those patterns that might be discerned, however, are potentially rich sources of dialogue and debate, which may stimulate further clarification of ideas and practices.

12.3 The main conclusions from the study are summarised below in paragraphs 12.4 to 12.13.

12.4 A considerable amount of structural and organisational change is taking place or has taken place recently in many institutions – particularly, but not exclusively in the post-1992 sector. This change is ultimately associated, either implicitly or explicitly, with improving the student experience. However, it can also be experienced by staff as disruptive and an obstacle to enhancement.

12.5 For a number of institutions achieving university status since 2005, the level of change has been understandably significant, but seen as valuable by the institutions.

12.6   The introduction of a clearer focus on enhancement in the institutional audit method is affecting institutions in varying ways, and is broadly welcomed, with occasional reservations.

12.7   There is some ambivalence about the relationship of enhancement and institutional audit – views range from full endorsement of enhancement as part of audit, to strongly expressed scepticism about the appropriateness of audit to examine enhancement.

12.8   There is no agreement about a single definition of QE – the range of definitions fall into some patterns, but these are not easily characterised by institutional type in the sample studied by the project.

12.9   The definition of QE offered by QAA for institutional audit purposes is broadly recognised as helpful and adopted by several institutions as their working definition. A small minority of institutions challenge the appropriateness of the definition. Sometimes the challenge is on the grounds that a single definition is unhelpful, for other respondents it is the particular notion of 'deliberate steps' that is questionable.

12.10 There is evidence of considerable strategic thinking and deliberation about QE across the sector, but this is seldom formulated in a specific QE strategy.

12.11 As QE has become an increasing focus, or an increasingly explicit concern for most institutions, it is often linked to learning and teaching strategies or to the broader strategic management of the student experience.

12.12 There is a sense of maturity about QA processes across institutions, supported by evidence from institutional audit that processes are robust. Some institutions are explicit about building on the outcomes of secure assurance processes to facilitate enhancement.

12.13 Many institutions are making, or have made, changes in processes and structures related to quality, and these are most often linked with enhancement activity. The changes may be small-scale or quite significant, and may involve changes to committees, support units or offices, and to the internal processes of quality management.

12.14　There are some particular, commonly used ideas related to enhancement that appear to be open to a number of ways of being understood. Since these ideas are so commonly used and differently understood, they present good subjects for further questions to be explored within and between institutions.

12.15　For example, among these ideas is the relationship of 'continuous improvement' and enhancement. Are they best seen as synonymous, or does 'continuous improvement' have connotations that are not necessarily present in 'enhancement'? This question is of interest not only because of the use of the term 'continuous improvement' in communications from HEFCE, but also because it throws light on the nature of how enhancement is understood. We have seen in the study that enhancement may be thought of as principally concerned with identifying inadequate practice and improving it, or as a process that continuously enhances the already excellent as well as the less good student experience.

12.16　Similar questions may be raised about a number of the themes recorded in the report above, some of those that occur to the project team are listed here, in the hope that they may be useful to stimulate further discussion in the sector.

12.17　To what extent is there, or can there be a shared understanding of 'good practice'? For example, is 'good practice' usually understood implicitly to mean practice that can have an impact outside of the context in which it is identified? How can dissemination of good practice move beyond 'getting the word out', to 'getting the word used'?

12.18　What is the relationship of QA to QE? What are the implications for effective institutional structures and processes of, for example, a conception that QA processes will be the source and driver for most QE activity, rather than a conception that QE is the overarching aim and the purpose of QA is secondary, to provide the necessary data and to monitor enhancement?

12.19　To what extent does QE involve risk, and how is any risk most effectively mitigated?

12.20   How broad are the aspects of the student experience that should be addressed as part of enhancement – is the focus narrowly on learning, teaching and assessment, or should other features, such as catering arrangements, for example, be considered?

12.21   To what extent can 'enhancement' be part of institutional strategy, or does the idea of taking deliberate steps at an institutional level run the risk of demotivating innovative academic staff?

12.22   There is no implication here that there are particular 'right' answers to any of these questions, simply that the asking of them may generate insights for institutions. Our hope is that these, and other themes emerging from this report, will be helpful in framing further discussion about the enhancement of quality in the student experience.

Annex 1: Questions/discussion guidelines

Definitions and concepts

1. To what extent is the way that the institution thinks about and approaches QA and QE changing?
   What are the drivers for change?

2. How do you (the institution?) define QE and QA?
   Is QE a concept that is recognised in the institution?
   Is there an institutional definition of QE shared across the institution?
   Is there one definition or many?
   Does it matter whether there is one consistent definition?
   Where does the definition come from? Who defines it?

3. Has the definition changed/is it changing?

Strategies

4. Is the concept of QE built into institutional and/or departmental strategies?
   Should it be?
   How explicit or implicit is QE in institutional or departmental strategies?

5. Are strategies related to QE in the institution changing?
   If so, in what way? (e.g. better integration of strategies)

6. Where is leadership for QE located (if such a person can be identified)?
   Has there been any recent change in this, or is change planned?

Institutional processes

7. To what extent are QA and QE processes linked (or separate) in the institution?

8. To what extent are students involved in QE processes?

9. How do you know what impact QE has in the institution?
   What are the ways you find out?

10. Are institutional quality processes (e.g. monitoring, review, validation, enhancement) changing in the institution?
    Both assurance and enhancement processes?
    If so, in what way?

11. How will you know what the impact of the changes to processes is?
   What kinds of measures/methods are being/will be employed to assess the impact?

Institutional structures

12. Who is involved in the structures in the institution (e.g. committees, teams, centres, units) that support QE?

13. Are they different people from those involved in QA?

14. Are institutional quality structures changing in the institution?
   Both assurance and enhancement structures?
   If so, in what way?

15. How will you know what the impact of structural change is?
   What kinds of measures/methods are being/will be employed to assess the impact of change?

Additional questions

16. What are the essential characteristics of good QE in your view?

17. What are the challenges to effective QE?

18. What is the place of risk/innovation in QE?

19. What does 'good practice' mean and how can it contribute?

20. How do/can students contribute to QE?

21. If your approach to QE is effective/successful, how will the institution be different in five years' time?

22. What role should external scrutiny play in QE?
   What benefits and dangers would you associate with external scrutiny?

Annex 2: List of participating institutions

Below is a revised and updated list of institutions that participated in this project. On behalf of QAA, the Higher Education Academy and HEFCE Project Team wishes to record its gratitude for the support and co-operation of all the partcipating institutions.

Please note
For the institutions marked (*), notes of meeting between QAA Liaison Officers and the respective institutions were not included in the initial analysis carried out for the Project Report. The Project Team aplogises to the institutions concerened for this oversight.

Where possible, the contents of the notes have been incorporated into tge presentation of the findings of the project at the conference on Wednesday 11 June 2008. Their contents have been found to support the earlier findings.

American InterContinental University London*
Anglia Ruskin University
The Arts Institute at Bournemouth
Ashridge Business School*
Aston University*
University of Bath
University of Bedfordshire
Birkbeck College, University of London
University of Birmingham
Birmingham City University
University of Bolton
Bournemouth University
University of Bradford
University of Brighton
University of Bristol
Buckinghamshire New University
University of Cambridge
Canterbury Christ Church University
University of Chester
City University
Conservatoire for Dance and Drama
Coventry University
Cranfield University
De Montfort University
University of Derby
University of Durham
University of East Anglia
Edge Hill University
University of Essex
University of Exeter
University of Gloucestershire
University of Greenwich
Heythrop College, University of London
University of Huddersfield
University of Keele

Kingston University
University of Leeds
Liverpool Hope University
Liverpool John Moores University
London Metropolitan University
London South Bank University
University of Manchester
Manchester Metropolitan University*
Middlesex University
University of Nottingham
University of Oxford
University of Plymouth
Queen Mary, University of London
Queen's University Belfast
University of Reading
Roehampton University
Royal Academy of Music
Royal College of Music
Royal Northern College of Music
Sheffield Hallam University
University of Sheffield
University of Southampton
St Mary's University College, Twickenham
Staffordshire University
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
Thames Valley University
Trinity College of Music*
University of Ulster
University of Westminster*
University of the West of England, Bristol
University of Winchester
University of Wolverhampton*
University of Worcester
Writtle College
University of York

Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?

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