

Using Data to Enhance Outcomes

Executive Summary

February 2021



Aim

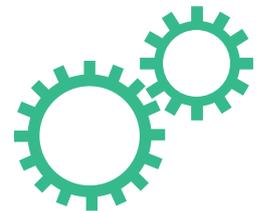
In 2020, QAA commissioned Shift Learning to conduct research with HE providers to investigate how data is used to inform quality assurance and enhancement activities.

The aim of the research-based investigation was to build a sector-wide picture of how providers were approaching and overcoming data challenges. This will inform further work to share effective practice and develop practical resources that will support our members and the sector in using data to inform decision-making. The research has identified clear recommendations for higher education providers seeking to improve the use of data in their quality processes and, ultimately, enhance the student learning experience.

Method

Following consultation with QAA, Shift Learning conducted a survey with 83 quality assurance (QA) professionals and colleagues with other roles working at QAA Member institutions across the UK. This was followed by 32 qualitative interviews with the same audience. The research ran from September to December 2020.

A further 8 interviews are planned for early 2021 to inform the development of case studies which will be published for QAA Members in addition to the final report.



Challenges

The research identified three critical challenges that it sought to address.

1

Data management

Managing and using large quantities of data in effective planning and decision-making.

2

Getting staff 'buy in'

How to create a data-informed culture in which staff willingly engage with and use data.

3

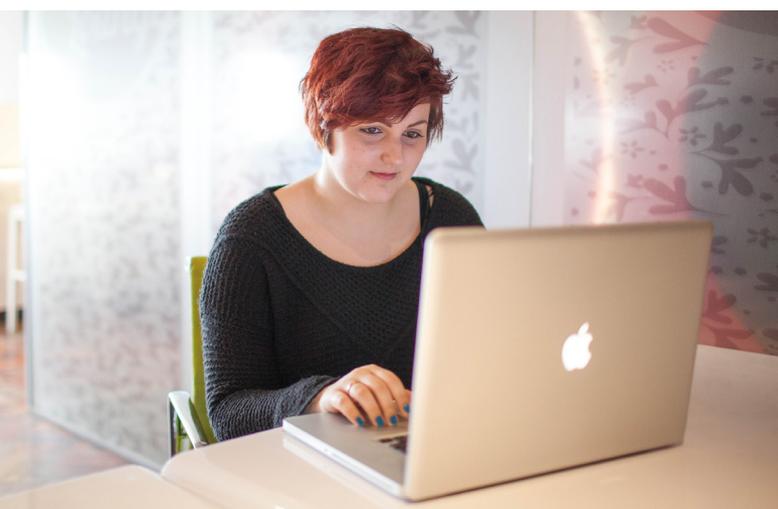
Monitoring the impact of data and evidence

Establishing best practice in measuring and evaluating outcomes.

Recommendations

In response to these challenges, the report identifies the following recommendations for overcoming barriers to data-led quality enhancement.

- **Speed up continuous quality improvements through online ‘pulse surveys’ with students**
Regular short surveys provide students with the opportunity to give feedback and see that their feedback is acted on and benefiting them directly. This can also help academic, administrative and student services teams to deliver prompt and targeted interventions, rapidly making enhancements and increasing student satisfaction.
- **Consult with staff to identify skills gaps and plan a training offer which meets provider needs**
Involving wider roles from the outset ensures that training is relevant and targeted to varying needs and levels of understanding. This identification can be achieved by a quick provider-wide questionnaire asking staff about which data-related topics, processes or tools they need help with and how they would prefer to access training or guidance.
- **Verify, contextualise and triangulate findings to engender confidence in data**
Staff need to be confident about the data being used to make decisions which affect them, their teams and their students. We heard how individual data sources could be seen as blunt tools which didn't reflect reality. This can be overcome by:
 - checking a range of data sources to verify the consistency of findings
 - placing purely numeric data within the context of open comments and other qualitative data
 - sense-checking through early, direct conversations if the data appears to identify a problem.



Key findings

Developing a data culture to evidence outcomes

Perceptions of a data-led culture were positive, but providers were at different points along the data journey. Although this data-focused audience clearly supported a data-led culture, many saw it as a 'big learning curve' and thought that more remained to be done to develop a positive, healthy and inclusive provider-wide culture. Providers could be grouped into three overarching categories:



Explorer, Experimenter and Innovator typologies

Data worked well when it was shared in tailored formats which empowered wider teams to 'own' the data. Sometimes a simple Excel document worked better than a complicated dashboard - personalisation and customisation were the key to great results - making data more accessible, relevant and useful.

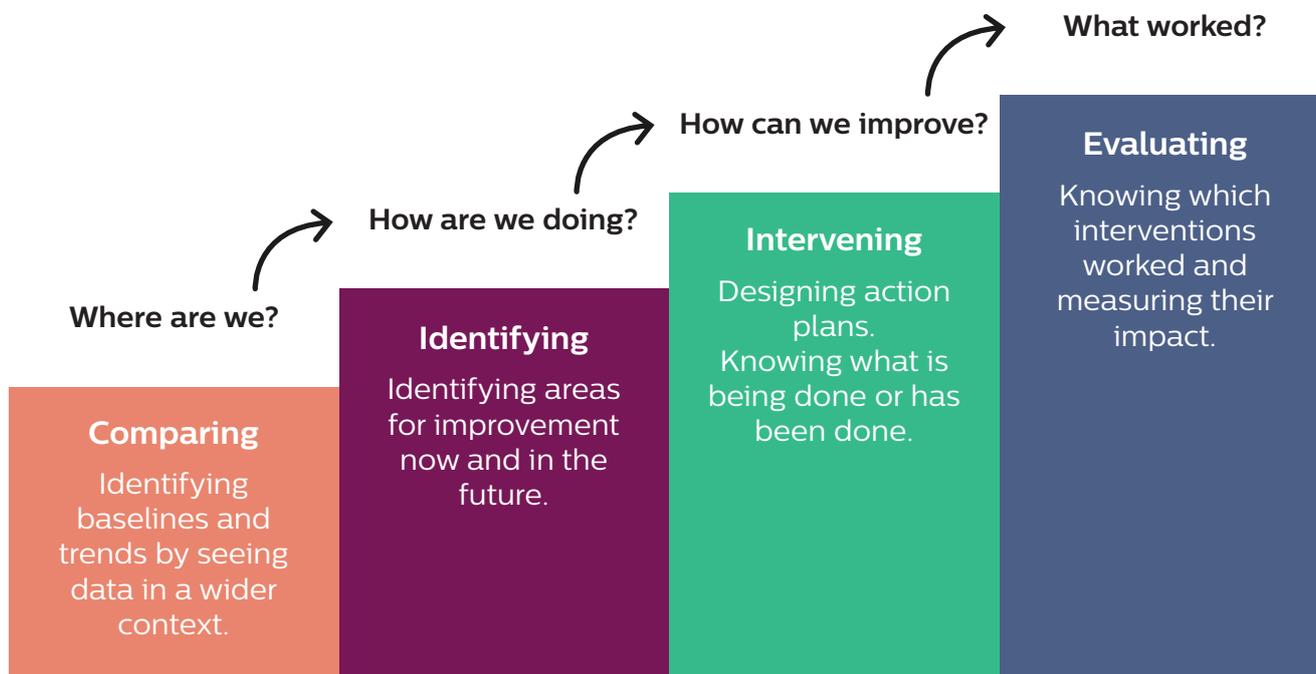
A positive values-based approach increased sharing upwards, downwards and between teams. A positive data culture could be achieved across all provider types because it is dependent on values, such as accountability, fairness, inclusiveness and transparency, rather than infrastructure.

Communicating and collaborating to develop a data-driven culture

- ✓ Communicate clearly and early with wider roles about how data is used.
- ✓ Provide data in formats that empower wider teams to self-serve and 'own' their data.
- ✓ Tailor content for individual teams and roles to facilitate the use of the data provider-wide.
- ✓ Develop fair processes allowing dissemination of granular data across departments/faculties.
- ✓ Evaluate how data flows within the provider to identify channels and roles that can be used more effectively to share what works and develop agreed good practice.

Monitoring the impact of data-driven quality assurance and enhancement

Data supported the monitoring of quality on four different levels, with providers aspiring to incorporate predictive modelling into planning and strategy processes.



The four levels of quality monitoring

There were mixed feelings around how the role of QA teams was seen in relation to facilitating the effective use of data in quality monitoring. Some contradiction was perhaps inherent because they could step in to support teams, yet intervene more forcibly if necessary. Positive approaches to creating a people-centred data culture were based on communication to deliver outcomes.

Data sources too were associated with a range of challenges and limitations. There were concerns that data could skew decision-making. Obstacles included small sample sizes, the lag between data collection and use, and poor data quality, as well as confusion about which data to use, how to access it, and having the time and resource to do that properly.

Some physical barriers were felt to exist around infrastructure, resources and data formats/quality - preventing a more positive data culture. Those tangible barriers could contribute to a less visible, but significant, attitudinal barrier. Respondents highlighted complex feelings surrounding data use ranging from not trusting the data to not being confident about using it.

Overcoming limitations/concerns about the use of data in decision-making

- ✓ Quality-check, contextualise and triangulate findings to engender confidence in data.
- ✓ Ensure the quality and validity of internally generated data.
- ✓ Leverage the power of qualitative student feedback for continuous improvement.
- ✓ Speed up continuous quality improvements through online 'pulse surveys' with students.

Building in validity

- ✓ Pilot test surveys.
- ✓ Use short, well-designed questionnaires, testing impact rather than subjective opinion.
- ✓ Use consistent provider-wide templates and processes for collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback data through surveys, focus groups and workshops.
- ✓ Ensure processes allow for unbiased collection of data.
- ✓ Incorporate a quality-check step performed by a dedicated role.

Overcoming attitudinal challenges and instilling confidence in data

- ✓ Make time and space for conversations about enhancing quality and outcomes.
- ✓ Co-create the meaning of data and show its impact and benefits.

Training all roles to promote positive and impactful use of data

Skills gaps were seen as a significant barrier to an impactful use of data.

Providers highlighted gaps in how to interpret, access and interrogate data and drill down to relevant areas. Academic staff need guidance on good practice and common traps in using data and felt less confident because they had to access it less frequently in their roles.



Developing a training offer that promotes impactful use of data

- ✓ Consult with staff to identify skills gaps and plan a training offer that meets provider needs.
- ✓ Develop systems to encourage more frequent interaction with data.
- ✓ Offer a range of training and workshopping options to encourage frequent use and refreshing of skills.

Read the full report

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the key findings from the research. The full report is published on our [Membership Resources Site](#), exclusively for QAA Members.



Published – 10 February 2021

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2021
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557000
Web: www.qaa.ac.uk