



When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project
Final Report Launch
14 May 2024



The context in which we operate

- Ethos of new public management and marketisation
 - Made explicit in HERA 2017
 - Increasing and diversifying provider base in England – ‘high-quality disruption’
- Divergences in regulatory approach
 - OfS, DFENI, HEFCW, SFC
- Accelerating technological disruption
 - COVID-19 and the ‘online pivot’
 - AI, used by students and providers
 - Data capture and prediction
- Adverse financial outlook
 - Tuition fees declining in real terms
 - Less welcome environment for international students
 - Rising cost of living.



Raised some interesting questions...

- Is there a conflict – or at least a tension – between QA and innovation?
- Under what conditions does QA best support innovation?
- Do new providers ‘do’ quality differently?



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Methodology

- Literature review
 - How is quality assured, and how is QA perceived?
 - What does 'innovation' mean in this context?
 - Does QA inhibit or support innovation?
 - Is technology driving change in QA practices?
- Survey exploring experiences of innovation and QA amongst UK higher education professionals (n=176)
 - What is driving innovation in HE?
 - Which QA domains most impact/most positively impact innovation?
- Six focus groups (n=25)
 - How do QA and innovation interact?
 - How might QA better support innovation?
- Case studies of innovation and QA (n=6).



Literature review themes

- Embedding a student-as-consumer lens has made innovation more difficult
- Increasing QA influence is received negatively (and with resistance) by academics
- Innovation less likely to be successful when it is externally-driven (top-down?) and active QA – associated with reduced agency and creativity
- COVID-19 stimulated innovation in L&T practice and in QA practice; the latter has not been routinely leveraged by universities
- Mistrust between academics and administrators both a root cause and an outcome of contemporary higher education.



Survey themes – QA an established but ambivalent role

- Participants fairly evenly spread across QA, academic, enhancement and development, professional services
- Almost 2/3 participants describe QA as being hybrid local/centralised, and more than a quarter in fully centralised
- Good understanding that QA is an integral part of HE: vast majority participants across all functions consider themselves as having responsibility for both assuring and enhancing quality
- Ambivalent story as to whether QA supports innovation and whether QA is responsive. In the context of innovative practice, QA is a facilitator, a gatekeeper, and a distractor.



Survey themes – innovation in L&T and in QA

- Most significant source of L&T innovation is incremental – ongoing reflection and refinement by module leaders. New modes of delivery and new courses also important catalysts of innovation
- Most commonly reported motivators for innovation are student centred: improving student satisfaction, promoting inclusivity, and to meet the needs of a changing student body
- Quality assurance domains with biggest impact on innovation are both top-down and bottom-up: learning & teaching strategies, transformation strategies, capability of staff members
- Survey respondents reported that COVID-19 led to simplified processes and fast-track decision-making, and 2/3 reported that at least some of these process changes had been retained. 3/4 respondents using data and learning analytics as part of QA/enhancement.



Focus Groups – different worlds but shared passion?

- Reflected on the extent to which L&T innovation could be managed strategically, given that it relied on individual creativity, capability and capacity
- QA staff identified as being in the middle of employer-driven, student-driven and staff-driven innovation
- Financial context is impacting support for innovation and the need for it to be well-focussed,
 - “...you can have the best, most interesting idea, but if it’s not going to make money it’s not going to happen ... and lots of great ideas don’t make money”
- Academic reputation is on the line, as well as their wellbeing and ability to stay fresh
- QA/enhancement can empower academics: importance of supporting innovation champions and myth-busting
- Huge amount of passion, commitment and enthusiasm to do thing better.



Focus Groups – need for a reset?

- QA colleagues themselves described the combination of busy people and lots of (admittedly often ‘archaic’) paperwork as being one of the reasons creativity can be stifled
- Vicious circle - QA colleagues can be too absorbed in the nitty-gritty, but even when they try to lift their heads and be more strategic in supporting innovation, get pulled back in responding to academic wanting to change fields on forms
- QA described needing to ‘reset’ their relationship with academics – BUT many ‘things you can't do’ can be folklore and myth
- Encouraging academic colleagues to engage QA early enough, and to make evidence-based proposals
- Some providers moving towards multi-functional teams in portfolio development. Layers, levels and silos reduce agility and increase people being in their own bubble.



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Calls to action

- Appropriately resourced and empowered QA teams who are intimately connected with academic innovation through carefully thought-out structures and processes
- Leaders and colleagues must harness the passion for high-quality innovative practice that we have affirmed exists in their institutions. We have shown that QA can be agile and innovative in itself – build on this.



Recommendations: People



Promote understanding



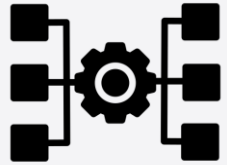
Build trust



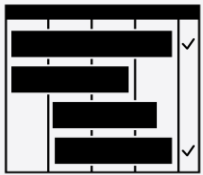
Break down the myths



Recommendations: Structure



Review structure



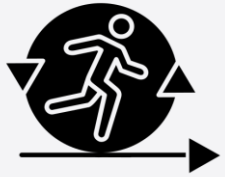
Plan for success



Go beyond benchmarks



Recommendations: Process



Seek agile QA processes



Enhance quality, don't just assure it



Build space to fail



And finally...

- Thank you to everyone who took part – the project team has been overwhelmed by the response to our work.



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