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THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT
IN THE CONTEXT OF MANAGERIALISM
AND HIGHER EDUCATION PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract

A core aspect of higher education public policy developments in Scotland has been the external quality assessment of learning and teaching provision. Controversial in their own right, such processes were often overshadowed by conflicts regarding the policy of accountability to Government and the apparent attack on university and staff autonomy. Thus, the research is set within a context of conflicting internal and external environments. Rapidly and radically changing public policy and perspectives of state-sector and institution-department managerialism gave conflicts over external accountability policy and external quality assessment processes broader significance. The research adopted a qualitative case study methodology, incorporating thirty six semi-structured interviews with key sector, institutional and departmental informants. The carefully selected informants had extensive experience of external quality assessment in Scottish universities and of sector, institutional and departmental perceptions and responses. Conclusions establish that external quality assessment has, across the Scottish university sector, had a positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. However, significant obstacles to a continued beneficial interface are evident and the need for external approaches to instil ownership of quality assurance and enhancement with subject level academics is underlined. Implications assert that continuing and principled policy conflict regarding the imposition of an externally driven change process of disputed relevance on a (semi) autonomous institution or sector will not necessarily fatally impede the process from having a beneficial catalytic impact, provided that factors internal and external to the institution combine to create an appropriate environment. Further, this can occur across a sector of similar but culturally distinct institutions. However, it is evident that processes may have only a limited impact and must evolve if there is to be a continuing benefit, as the internal and external factors that have combined to create an environment open to influence may change. Given that change processes in public and private sectors can also result in conflict between internal and external environmental factors, the implications may extend beyond the Scottish university sector and quality assessment.

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| AUT(S) | Association of University Teachers (Scotland) |
| CDP | Committee of Directors of Polytechnics |
| CNAA | Council for National Academic Awards |
| COSHEP | Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals |
| CUA | Conference of University Administrators |
| CVCP | Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals |
| CSUP | Committee of Scottish University Principals |
| ELIR | Enhancement Led Institutional Review |
| HEFCE | Higher Education Funding Council for England |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| HEQC | Higher Education Quality Council |
| HMI | Her Majesty's Inspectorate |
| ISO | International Organisation for Standards |
| JPG | Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education |
| JRG | Joint Review Group (SHEFC-COSHEP) |
| NAB | National Advisory Board |
| NDPB | Non-Departmental Public Body |
| NHS | National Health Service |
| NUS | National Union of Students |
| PCFC | Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council |
| PSB | Professional and Statutory Body |
| QAA | Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education |
| QWG | Quality Working Group |
| RAE | Research Assessment Exercise |
| SCOP | Standing Conference of Principals |
| SHEFC | Scottish Higher Education Funding Council |
| SOED | Scottish Office Education Department |
| TQA | Teaching Quality Assessment |
| TQF | Teaching Quality Forum |
| UFC | Universities Funding Council |
| UGC | University Grants Committee |

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis considers the catalytic influence in Scottish universities of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on enhancing or revitalising the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

The current chapter provides an overview of the research. It outlines the complex higher education public policy and managerialism context in which the research is set. It also highlights the commonality between higher education's internal and external environments and those of the public and private sectors that enables the implications drawn from the research results to apply beyond Scottish higher education and quality assessment.

An outline of existing empirical work on external quality assessment in universities clarifies that there is scope for the current research. The research question, propositions and levels of analysis are presented, as is a brief overview of the methodological approach adopted and the research design utilised. Key themes emerging from the research results and subsequent implications drawn are also presented. Finally, an outline of the remaining chapters is set out.

1.2 Context and Relevance of Research

External pressures, principally from Government and often backed by legislation, have led to an increasingly managerial approach being adopted by universities in the UK (e.g. Cuthbert, 1992), a change that has not interfaced easily with the traditionally collegial culture of these institutions (e.g. Morrell, 1992). Accordingly, a tension has been evident in the UK between the state and the university sector and also between universities and their own departments (e.g. Henkel, 2000). This

tension has widely been considered as one borne from the perceived advance of managerialism upon academic territory (e.g. Kogan and Hanney, 2000).

University sector documentation (e.g. SHEFC, 1996a) indicates that from the early 1990s onwards a key tension in Scotland, and indeed across the UK, has been in relation to the external accountability and quality assessment of learning and teaching provision at subject level. This tension was embodied in the debate surrounding the rationale for, and definition, implementation and operation of, Funding Council TQA (Teaching Quality Assessment) processes (1992-1998 in Scotland) and, latterly, QAA Subject Review (2000-2002 in Scotland).

The conflict was essentially one of policy, concerning the institutional burden of having to satisfy dual processes. In 1992 the Scottish university sector was concerned at the potential increase in institutional burden that could be created by subject level assessment, in the form of SHEFC TQA, given that an external audit process already operated at institution level. While it is evident that the accountability versus burden debate clearly included valid educational and practical issues, it was also highly political and a manifestation of the wider tension caused by the conflict between universities being accountable to Government and the subsequent erosion of institutional autonomy. Further, it is evident that the overwhelming focus on the policy conflict throughout the 1992-2002 period led to the detailed discussions regarding the subject level quality assessment processes inadvertently being given a lower status, even though conscientiously tackled by those involved.

This thesis contends that a key point that was often overshadowed by the policy conflict was that of the enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching provision and the influence of external quality assessment processes upon this. This is a relevant avenue of investigation because although the accountability-burden policy debate has continued both from institutional and departmental perspectives, it is evident from university sector documentation that it has been joined by increased attention on the enhancement focus that external mechanisms should offer (e.g. QAA

2003a). Indeed, this thesis is being written in early 2004, with the third phase of external quality assessment, taking the form of Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR), in its infancy.

1.3 Literature on External Quality Assessment in Universities

Although much has been written about higher education public policy, analysis of the impacts, according to Kogan and Hanney (2000), has been largely inferential. Indeed, regarding quality assessment, Drennan (2000) highlights the lack of research undertaken. However, four distinct studies (Henkel, 2000; Drennan, 2000; Sharp et al, 1997; Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998), together with aspects of other less closely associated research (e.g. Brennan and Shah 2000a; McDowell et al 1997; Morley, 2003) offer insights into the influence of external quality assessment. It is highlighted that only three of the above studies are at least partially focused on the Scottish experience of external quality assessment and these do not cover the entire 1992-2002 subject level quality assessment period.

Whilst it is evident that pressure and competition brought a sector-wide focus on quality assessment and also on learning and teaching, there are strong indications that this may have been short-term, adaptive behaviour (e.g. Drennan, 2000; Henkel, 2000). Further, there are indications that there is substantial hostility to external quality assessment (e.g. Morley, 2003) and that there are negative aspects associated with experience of the processes (e.g. McDowell et al, 1997).

1.4 Research Focus, Propositions and Levels of Analysis

Addressing a gap in the existing literature, the current research will consider whether the implementation and operation of external quality assessment has, across the Scottish university sector, had a positive catalytic influence on the institutional and departmental focus on the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, and if so, identify obstacles to, and options for, a continued beneficial interface. In line with this, the following propositions are drawn:

1. The implementation and operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities has had a positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.
2. The positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, has occurred across the Scottish university sector, even though institutions are culturally distinct.
3. The benefits to be gained from SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of the processes. Such negative perspectives and the substantial focus on research performance could erode the benefits gained. For the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching to continue to be positively influenced by external processes on a long-term basis, future approaches must instil ownership of quality assurance with subject level academics while retaining a level of institutional assessment sufficient to satisfy the existing external accountability obligation.

In order to assess the longer term influence of the 1992-2002 external quality assessment period, it was necessary to gather information from individuals who not only had personal experience of external quality assessment and an informed understanding of the inherent state-sector and institution-department interfaces but who could also provide a perception of the experience and long-term reactions of institutions and their constituent departments. Essentially, the propositions sought to ascertain behaviour and perceptions of behaviour at aggregate higher levels regarding external – whether to the institution or the department – environmental factors embodied in the policy of external accountability and resultant quality assessment processes. Accordingly, the levels of analysis addressed were those at institutional and departmental levels.

1.5 Literature on Culture and Managerialism

Although this research is focused on the catalytic influence of external quality assessment, the research context clearly indicates that the interface with institutions, and their constituent departments, did not exist in a vacuum but should be considered within the context of higher education public policy and managerialism.

Accordingly, to gain a fuller understanding as to how these wider issues may have influenced the opportunity for external quality assessment to have a positive influence, on a long-term basis, literature regarding culture and managerialism in universities is considered. This builds on the higher education public policy background already established. Such a consideration underlines the relevance of the propositions and the complexity of the context in which they are framed.

Further, the consideration of culture, managerialism, and change-focused policy developments establishes a theoretical framework that enables focused research on external quality assessment in universities to draw broader change management implications applicable to higher education public policy in general and also to the public and private sectors. A clarification of the internal and external environmental factors affecting higher education, and the public and private sectors, underlines the broader relevance of the current research.

Research (e.g. Deem et al, 2000; Brennan and Shah, 2000a) regarding managerialism in UK universities has considered the impact of increased external demands upon institutions, departments, and academic staff. Government policies increased the pressure on universities to adopt a more managerial approach and this heightened the collegial-management tension in institutions. The massification and public accountability of the sector meant that academics found it difficult to maintain the existing values and methods of working established in the previous elite system (Henkel, 1997). Indeed, individual institutions, as well as the system, underwent a restructuring that resulted in organisational changes and altered the culture of higher education (Walford, 1991).

For many in the academic community, Government policies and processes were less about quality assurance and more about the assertion of state power (e.g. Morley, 2003). Greater control and definition of the higher education agenda and the means in which it was satisfied increased Government criteria and operational power (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996) to the detriment of institutional autonomy and individual professional discretion.

The complexity of cultures in universities, at several levels (e.g. McNay, 1995; Becher 1989), is such that cultural characteristics can produce or resist change (Trowler, 1998). This latter reaction is particularly evident when professionalism is threatened (Becher and Kogan, 1992). This is an important consideration for this thesis because the perception that the sector, its institutions, and the academics within them, had of external accountability and quality assessment could perhaps affect the influence that such processes had on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision. There is the possibility that the negative perceptions of the associated wider managerial influence of Government upon the university sector could foster sector, institutional and individual academic staff hostility to external quality assessment. Further, such hostility could be also be felt inside institutions if university efforts to satisfy external pressures were perceived by academic staff as institution-department managerialism.

Thus, to appropriately assess the catalytic influence of external quality assessment on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, on a long-term basis, the complex relationship between academic departments, universities and Government regarding the implementation and operation of external accountability policies and processes must be considered in the context of the tension between collegial freedom and managerial accountability.

However, the complexity of the context in which the current research sits is such that it remains difficult to separate process from policy; increased accountability from decreased autonomy and professional discretion (Morley, 2003); and reporting obligations to Government from diminishing institutional and departmental criteria and operational power (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996). Similarly, it remains difficult to separate rational objections by academic staff from blinded self-interest (Newby, 1999); and institutional responses to external pressures from institution-department managerialism.

It is highlighted that although an externally driven change process in higher education brings together often conflicting internal and external environmental factors, this situation is not distinct to the university sector. Both the public and private sectors experience interaction between internal factors such as culture, professionalism and resistance to change, and external factors such as legislative requirements and a changing market place (e.g. Lawler and Hearn, 1995; White, 2000). Thus, the research results may have implications that extend beyond the Scottish university sector and quality assessment.

1.6 Research Design and Methodology

Underpinned by the phenomenological research tradition, the research considered reality to be that which was constructed by individuals involved in the research situation (Creswell, 1998). In effect this meant the realities of key informants (principally university staff), with appropriate institutional and departmental experience of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. A principal element of the research process was to interview key actors in their natural settings to allow them to present their views in the context that they related to, and to encourage informants to express their perceptions. This linked with the adoption of an evolving and contextually rich qualitative approach that focused on what happened to the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision over the period in which the SHEFC and QAA processes operated rather than the more quantitative, cause and effect issue of why these changes happened (Merriam, 1988).

A case study approach enabled the research to study the complexity of the universities. Purposeful sampling of participants was adopted as a core element in the field research. This facilitated the selection of informants with an appropriate employment position and depth, length, and variety of experience to inform the research. Triangulation was utilised to increase the validity, reliability, and generalisability of the research and involved undertaking semi-structured interviews with three separate categories of key actors.

The first, and core, phase of the triangulated approach involved twenty two individual interviews with participants undertaking key institutional roles such as Senior Officer with responsibility for learning and teaching and Director of Academic Quality (generic title). Participants were drawn from each university in Scotland. A second phase of interviews involved ten current or former Heads of Department who had participated as either SHEFC TQA Assessors/Lead Assessors or QAA Academic Reviewers. This second phase was undertaken at a single Scottish university because focusing on a single institution at which the researcher had an existing relationship facilitated the selection of, and access to, appropriate participants. The third phase of the field research involved Sector Interviews with four senior university sector staff with a broad and in-depth knowledge and experience of the external accountability of learning and teaching in Scottish universities. This included a Principal from a post-1992 university, a Principal from a pre-1992 university, the Head of the QAA Scottish Office, and the SHEFC Deputy Director (Quality and Learning Innovation). These interviews additionally provided valuable insight into the interface between the institutional and sector environments.

Semi-structured interviews were used to find out about each respondent's feelings, behaviour, and interpretations regarding institutional, departmental, and individual reactions to external assessment and the influence of such processes. The data analysis utilised categorical aggregation to bring together aspects of data to identify key themes and direct interpretation to draw upon single instances for meanings, as appropriate. In order to present the research data and findings accurately, and to provide the reader with an opportunity to share some of the researcher's experiences

and to gain an experiential understanding of the cases, interviewee comments and detailed Case Study Examples were used to illustrate themes and points.

1.7 Research Results

The research results supported the propositions presented earlier. It is evident that the importance of performing well in external quality assessments was a key catalytic factor in the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. The resulting attention paid to appropriate performance in external quality assessments led to an increased focus on internal quality assurance, and with that learning and teaching. However, although the primary aim was performance, focus on, preparation for, and experience of external assessment led to a lasting enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.

Perceptions of institutional cultures indicated that the sector was made up of culturally distinct universities. These perceptions were supported by the variance in the institutional research/teaching focus and in the approach to the balance between institutional overview and departmental responsibility regarding the quality assurance of learning and teaching. However, the research results indicate that the influence of external quality assessment was felt in similar ways across the entire Scottish university sector. Indeed, the occurrence of a level of convergence across the sector regarding approaches to the quality assurance of learning and teaching provision is a further indication that the influence of external quality assessment has been sector-wide.

Although it has had a positive influence, the acceptance of external assessment remains fragile. Further, negative aspects of external assessment may impede such processes from further aiding the enhancement of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision. This is compounded by the continued focus on research and the resulting financial and status rewards that strong performance can bring to institutions, departments and

individuals. For the continued development of the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, an appropriate approach that instils ownership of quality assurance and enhancement with subject level academics is required.

1.8 Conclusions and Implications

In assessing the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis, the research results are considered against those of previous empirical work (e.g. Drennan, 2000; Sharp et al, 1997). This underlines that the current research represents a distinct contribution in terms of its focus, propositions and resulting themes. Where the research supports, challenges or supplements aspects of related empirical work, this is discussed.

The current research makes a contribution to knowledge in establishing the catalytic influence that external quality assessment has had on enhancing or revitalising the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, on a long-term basis. It is thus closely linked to the current and evolving enhancement debate centred on how external monitoring and initiatives on a sector-wide basis might improve the quality of what is often the output of individual academic staff. The conclusions will also add perspective to forthcoming reviews of the ELIR process and of related external quality assurance measures.

In considering the research findings in the contextual light of related research on state-sector and institution-department managerialism, it is concluded that despite political and academic obstacles, external subject level assessment has had a positive catalytic influence. Indeed, external accountability remains a key factor in maintaining the focus on learning and teaching in the face of a continuing and increasing research orientation. However, it is evident that significant obstacles remain and that ownership of assurance and enhancement by subject level academics is essential if external assessment methodologies are to continue to have a beneficial impact.

Moving from specific quality assessment and practical considerations to wider implications, a number of key points are highlighted. Firstly, it is evident that continuing and principled policy conflict regarding the imposition of an external assessment process of disputed relevance on a (semi) autonomous institution will not necessarily fatally impede the process from having a beneficial impact. This is provided that factors internal and external to the institution combine to create an appropriate environment for change. Secondly, it is possible for this to occur across a sector of similar but culturally distinct institutions. However, thirdly, it is also evident that processes may have only a limited impact and must evolve if there is to be a continuing benefit, particularly given that supporting internal and external factors may change.

Further, as in the university sector, given that change policies and processes in the public and private sectors may bring complex often conflicting internal and external environmental factors such as professional autonomy and stakeholder demands together, the research results have implications that extend beyond the Scottish university sector and quality assessment.

1.9 Outline of Thesis

Chapter One has provided an overview of the thesis. In focusing on the accountability of learning and teaching provision, **Chapter Two** discusses higher education public policy developments in terms of the growing influence of Government on autonomous universities. This chapter details the relationship between, and respective views of, the university sector and relevant agencies. The relevance of perceptions of state-sector managerialism is evident in debates and conflicts regarding both the policy of external accountability and the subject level assessment processes.

With the contentious nature of external quality assessment apparent from the previous chapter, **Chapter Three** reviews the current literature regarding the influence of such processes. Following the identification of a gap in the literature - in terms of the possible catalytic influence of external quality assessment on the

enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis – research propositions are defined and level of analysis justified. Recognising that although the focus of the research is on external quality assessment the subject matter is set within a complex context that may affect the opportunity for external process to have a beneficial influence, the relevance of culture and managerialism is further discussed. The importance of internal environmental factors, such as professionalism and resistance to change, and external environmental factors, such as legislative interventions that in turn alter the market place, are highlighted. Further, the commonality in experience of internal and external environmental factor interaction, in terms of the university sector, the wider public sector and the private sector, is established.

Chapter Four establishes that a consistently high quality of informed semi-structured interview data, providing both individual and aggregate perceptions of the influence of external quality assessment, will best aid the research. A consideration of the levels of analysis and the quality of data required leads to triangulated data being drawn from three purposefully-sampled sources: Institutional Interviews drawn from across the sector; a carefully selected single university Head of Department Interview case study involving ten participants with experience as both Head of Department and external assessment peer reviewer; and four Sector Interviews involving participants with a detailed, varied, and lengthy experience of external quality assessment on a sector-wide level.

Research results were drawn from the field research involving key informants with substantial knowledge of the operation and influence of external quality assessment. The informants provided a detailed insight into sector, institutional, departmental, peer reviewer and individual perspectives. The Institutional Interviews (**Chapter Five**), Head of Department Interviews (**Chapter Six**), and Sector Interviews (**Chapter Seven**) evidenced that internal and external environmental factors combined to create a suitable environment for external quality assessment to have a beneficial catalytic influence on a long-term basis. However, the research results

also underlined that the existence of negative perspectives and detrimental factors emphasises that there is a need for ownership of quality assessment and enhancement to be with the academic community and at the subject level.

Chapter Eight summarises the research results and considers them in the light of previous studies, underlining the distinct contribution made by the current research. A consideration of the results in terms of the higher education public policy and managerialism context in which the research sits enables implications to be drawn. Implications focus on the interaction of internal and external environmental factors regarding the influence of an externally driven change management process. Given the commonality that exists between the higher education, public, and private sectors in terms of the interaction between internal and environmental factors, the implications of the research are applicable beyond the Scottish university sector. Finally, possible limitations of the study, such as the chosen levels of analysis, as well as opportunities for further research, such as an assessment of the impact on the wider academic community of the emerging ELIR approach, are presented.

Chapter Two

Public Policy Developments

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the context of the research. After presenting the public policy developments affecting the university sector and outlining the changing relationship with Government that paralleled this, the complex and tense conflict regarding the external accountability of learning and teaching provision is detailed. Within this, consultations and discussions during the development and operation of the SHEFC TQA process are highlighted.

2.1.1 The Distinctiveness of Scottish Higher Education

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the research question focuses on the Scottish university sector. It has been widely considered to be both distinct and separate from that found in the rest of the UK. For example, Bloomer (2003) asserts that *“Scottish education has always been distinct from that in England and the remainder of the United Kingdom. Indeed, along with the Church and the law, education became one of the defining characteristics of continuing Scottish tradition and separateness”* (p.159). However, the Scottish university sector has strong links with the UK sector through higher education public policy and academic interfaces. Thus the Scottish university sector can provide both a distinct focus for this research and a platform from which the research conclusions can have wider implications.

The separation of Scottish education is evidenced by legislative provision found, for example, in the Act of Union 1707 and the Education (Scotland) Act 1872, the latter of which established a Scotch Education Department which in 1885 became part of the Scottish Office (Bloomer, 2003). More recently governmental power over education, including higher education, was devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 1998. Prior to this the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 brought clearly separate tertiary funding arrangements in the form of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC).

However, distinctiveness is not owed solely to political separation. McCrone (2003) considers that "*Scottish education is central to Scottish national identity*" (p.239) and cites Anderson's (1997) view of the Scottish tradition as including qualities such as "*individualism, social ambition*" and "*respect for talent above birth*" (p.239).

Whilst Bryce and Hume (2003) consider that "*compared with the school system, the formal distinctiveness of Scotland's universities is less clear cut*" (p.112), along with others they note distinguishing features. The tradition of a four year honours degree is probably the most easily identifiable feature of Scottish higher education but within the sector also lie elements such as a high participation rate (currently 50% against 35% in England) (Caldwell, 2003).

The separateness and distinctiveness of Scottish higher education has continued to be recognised with, for example, the UK's 1996 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education having a distinct Scottish (Garrick) committee that reported separately. Further, even though the QAA has a UK-wide remit, it provides a separate higher education qualifications framework from the rest of the UK because of the distinctiveness of the provision in Scotland. Moreover, in relation to accountability, SHEFC introduced a distinct form of TQA, and the influence of this process is a fundamental empirical focus of investigation for this thesis.

Further, even when the UK-wide Subject Review process replaced TQA, although its architecture may have been a UK-wide venture, the premature demise of the process meant that the only universities that underwent this form of scrutiny were Scottish. Indeed, as a third phase of external quality assessment emerges, Scotland's distinctiveness is once again illustrated by the adoption of a UK-compatible but separate Scottish approach. This process of Enhancement Led Institutional Review has been borne out of a partnership between SHEFC, the Scottish higher education sector, and the QAA Scottish Office.

2.1.2 The Scottish University Sector

Although the entire Scottish higher education sector was subject to TQA, this thesis focuses only on universities. This is because the expansion of the university sector following the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 provided a clearly defined opportunity to consider whether the pre-1992 and post-1992 universities reacted differently to SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review.

The Scottish university sector's oldest institution, the University of St Andrews, dates back to 1411 and was joined by three other 'ancient' universities before the end of the sixteenth century. The 1960s brought four 'modern' universities and the 1990s conversions saw five 'new' universities join the fold. As well as an increase in the number of institutions, Caldwell (2003) highlights that from 1990 until 2003 university sector student numbers more than trebled.

Whilst Scottish education is distinct and separate from the rest of the UK, the Scottish university sector is not homogenous. Institutional missions, according to Caldwell (2003), see the pre-1992 universities "*characterised by strong research performance and a teaching subject mix biased towards academic disciplines*" (p.64), whilst in the post-1992 universities "*teaching is concentrated on vocational subjects and most of the research undertaken is of an applied nature*" (p.64). Further, aspects such as size, structure, management, governance, wealth, and recruitment, in terms of the geographical origin and socio-economic grouping of students, set institutions apart.

2.1.3 The Importance of the Contextual Environment

The introduction to this thesis highlighted the potential relevance of the contextual environment in which the research is set. This chapter will establish that this was an environment constructed upon principled conflict rather than iteration regarding the detail of external quality assessment processes, although the latter did evolve within the shadow of the primary policy debate.

This chapter will detail the debate between, on the one hand, the Government, SHEFC, and latterly the QAA, and on the other, the Scottish university sector, which was collectively represented principally by employer and trade associations such as COSHEP (latterly Universities Scotland), rather than trade union bodies, such as the Association of University Teachers, which largely remained in the background. This establishes a necessary and valuable context against which any influences can be assessed. Of course, the merits of the processes are highly likely to be a constituent factor in whether they are accepted and have an influence, and this issue will also be explored in this chapter.

A key aspect is the presentation of the findings of the SHEFC-COSHEP Joint Review Group (JRG), which reported during the build up to the SHEFC TQA-QAA Subject Review transition and the move to a single quality assurance body. The JRG formally acknowledged the longstanding conflict between Government, its agencies and the university sector regarding the appropriateness of policies and processes. Although many of these differences continued throughout the QAA Subject Review period, this chapter principally focuses on SHEFC TQA as it is largely during this time that the key conflicts occurred. Accordingly, this period provides the greatest contextual insight.

This chapter highlights that although the maintenance and improvement of the quality of learning and teaching provision was a core aim of SHEFC TQA, the debate became one largely of methodology and its related burden. Although this policy conflict concerned genuine issues, such as the use of results, it is argued that it was also a manifestation of a wider tension regarding accountability to Government and the safeguarding of institutional autonomy.

The context illustrates the often confrontational and political environment in which review processes were expected to have a positive influence on the assurance and improvement of the quality of learning and teaching provision. Further, a consideration of the context in which SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review operated will aid the thesis in its contribution to future higher education policy.

Ostensibly the same university sector environment exists today, even though current discussions regarding the development of QAA Enhancement Led Institutional Review appear to be more open than in earlier consultations.

Although the research focuses on subject level accountability in the form of the SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review processes, HEQC Audit is a relevant contextual factor given that it represents one part of the dual accountability processes that the Government-sector conflict centred on. For reference, the distinction between these forms of external accountability is illustrated by the following SHEFC description:

“...Quality Audit will be concerned chiefly with an institution’s systems and processes rather than with individual course/subject processes and outcomes, and will be accountable to the community of HEIs themselves. The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) has responsibility for Quality Assessment”.

(SHEFC 1992a, p.1)

It is emphasised that in exploring the context to the research, an assessment of the contribution of key stakeholders was made. An extensive search of documentary evidence showed that the debate regarding both policy and process was dominated by two sets of stakeholders. As stated earlier, on one side was the Government, together with, in Scotland, SHEFC and, latterly, the QAA. On the other side was the university sector, principally represented in Scotland by COSHEP (later renamed Universities Scotland) and across the UK by the CVCP (later renamed Universities UK). Additional, specific, literature searches underlined that key higher education sector stakeholders, such as employer bodies, student bodies (e.g. NUS (Scotland)) and staff trade unions (e.g. AUT (Scotland)) were considerably less vocal than others and did not make a substantial or particularly distinct contribution to the context (e.g. AUT(S), 1992).

The pre-understanding of the researcher meant that experience of the university sector perspective could be coupled with documentary evidence to provide a rich insight to such views. In terms of the SHEFC/Government perspective, to avoid undue reliance on documentary evidence, input from key SHEFC personnel, namely Dr Bill Harvey (with experience as the Deputy Director of the Quality and Innovation Branch) and Mr Harry Mitchell (with experience as the Head of the Quality Assessment Branch) was obtained. Published comments from Dr Paul Clark, who had experience as both Director of Quality Assessment at HEFCE and Director of Teaching and Learning at SHEFC, also aided the interpretation of the context.

2.2 The Government-University 'Exchange Relationship'

The UK university sector has traditionally been one that has operated in a largely autonomous manner, free from state interference. The 'exchange relationship' between the university sector and Government was one of trust, whereby the state funded institutions in return for the education and training of the workforce (Kogan and Hanney, 2000).

For the bulk of the twentieth century, "*the policy was to have no formal policy at all, except to give autonomous institutions as much or as little money as the Government thought it could afford*" (MacLure 1987, p.11). Save for the external examiner system and accreditation arrangements with professional and statutory bodies, universities operated self-regulation (Henkel, 2000; Moodie, 1991).

Freedom from state intervention was a key distinguishing factor between the 'autonomous sector' of universities and the 'public sector' of polytechnics and colleges which were more closely bound to (local) government authority (Farrant, 1987). However, despite this distinction it is evident that the universities' principal source of funding, like the 'public sector', was and remains the public purse (Bird, 1996).

2.3 The Assertion of Power by the Paymaster

Although the relationship between the state and the university sector continually evolved, fundamental changes occurred when the Thatcher philosophy of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Martin, 1998) was applied by Conservative Governments in the 1980s and 1990s to recipients of public funding. It was intended that exposure to market forces and managerial control would satisfy the aims of increased public sector efficiency and the limitation of professional autonomy (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996). In turn, this would serve the ultimate goals of controlling inflation and increasing economic control.

The University sector did not escape this focus. Massive expansion was a manifestation of the Government desire for a market approach to higher education. Closely tied to this was the aim of achieving value for money, thus greater control of funding and increased accountability were integral to this approach (Barnett and Bjarnason, 1999; Bird, 1996; Henkel, 2000). The resulting focus on the “*policy responsiveness of higher education*” (Henkel, 2000, p.49) highlighted that the balance in the exchange relationship had swung heavily in favour of the state.

The 1980s and 1990s brought major changes to the policy, structure, legislative framework, and government control of the university sector, affecting both the sector and individual institutions (Henkel, 2000; Cuthbert, 1999; Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996). A collective and largely consensual state-university approach to governance (Moodie, 1991) was replaced by one of increasing and focused government intervention.

Key to the Government’s focus on higher education was its lack of confidence in the university sector management of resources and maintenance of quality (Henkel, 2000). To ensure the satisfaction of its philosophy of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, greater Government intervention was deemed necessary. Through its actions in changing higher education policy, the state “*asserted its power as paymaster*” (p.47).

2.4 Changes to the Structure and Funding of the Sector

The Conservative Government sought to lessen university dependence on state resourcing. The aim was that expansion in the sector and a market approach would ensure competition for funding. Institutions would *“compete in proposing, while the funders would dispose”* (Cuthbert, 1999).

Key to this funding approach was the staged replacement of the Universities Grants Committee (UGC) by national Funding Councils. The UGC had traditionally acted as a buffer between the state and the university sector, maintaining the exchange relationship (e.g. Elton, 1992; Tapper and Salter, 1997). Radford described the UGC as *“perhaps a typically British approach, sort of ‘hands-off’ state control. It was also a rather gentlemanly system (anecdote claims that the Grants Committee never had anything so vulgar as an actual vote and concluded business in good time for lunch)”* (Radford, 1997, p.35).

Although the manner in which the UGC operated could be viewed as serving the interests of the university sector rather than those of the Government, in the period preceding its replacement some considered that it *“...was no longer serving as a buffer but more as a conduit of government policy and an agent of its implementation”* (Trow, 1991, p.19). The UGC approach had changed but in the eyes of Government its prior conduct had made it a prime candidate for replacement.

The 1987 Review of the University Grants Committee (Croham Report) wanted a more managerial stance and, effectively, the removal of the buffer approach (Barnett and Bjarnason, 1999), advocating that the UGC should have *“unambiguous powers to attach conditions to grant”* (Kogan and Hanney, 2000, p.120). Pressure on the UGC also came in the form the 1987 Higher Education White Paper ‘Meeting the Challenge’ (Department of Education and Science, 1987) which had as one of its three aims the objective that *“higher education should serve the economy more effectively”* (p.iv) and advocated that the UGC should be reconstituted. The intention was that this would clarify responsibilities, improve financial accountability and increase effectiveness.

Subsequently, the Education Reform Act 1988 replaced the UGC with the Universities Funding Council (UFC). The new arrangements ensured that funding for the higher education sector was firmly part of a statutory framework whereby the state had authority to impose funding conditions (Henkel, 2000).

The Act applied across the higher education sector, establishing the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) for the 'public sector' institutions. It should be noted that in Scotland the equivalent Scottish Central Institutions were not funded by the PCFC; rather they were under the control of the Scottish Office (Swinnerton-Dyer, 1996). The PCFC replaced the NAB (National Advisory Board for Public Sector Higher Education), an earlier attempt to add a central government dimension to local government control (Henkel, 2000).

Whilst the PCFC was welcomed by the polytechnics as bringing a greater freedom from local government influence, the UFC was seen by the existing universities as the *"end of a system based on personal relationships, trust and a shared belief in the value of academic self-regulation on the grounds that the interests of higher education and the state were, if not common, then easily reconcilable"* (Henkel, 2000, p.40). Both the UFC and the PCFC had significant involvement from the private sector and had the aim of *"attuning the higher education sector more closely to the 'needs of the economy'"* (Rees and Stroud, 2001, p.76).

The evolution of the funding mechanism continued when the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 replaced the UFC with separate national Funding Councils. In Scotland, the Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) 1992 established the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB).

Parallel to changes in the funding mechanism, key structural changes in terms of the number of universities and students occurred across the higher education sector. The Education Reform Act 1988, with its reconstitution of the funding arrangements, was part of a conscious Government plan for expansion of the sector (Walford, 1991).

The latter half of the century had seen considerable growth in higher education participation. The university sector expanded in the 1960s and 1970s (Henkel, 2000). In Scotland, the 1960s saw four new universities (Dundee, Heriot-Watt, Stirling, and Strathclyde) join the ancient universities (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, St. Andrews). Also in the 1960s, the (Robbins) Report of the Committee on Higher Education recommended a unitary system that included universities, technical universities and colleges of education (Price, 1996). It “*legitimised expansion*” (Kogan and Hanney, 2000, p.117) by establishing the principle that places should be available for those with suitable qualifications. In the 1980s, as the universities translated funding cuts into reduced intakes, the public sector expanded to meet unsatisfied demand (Henkel, 2000).

The Conservative Governments of the 1980s and 1990s sought to further expand the sector to feed the knowledge economy but to do so in a manner that provided value for money. The 1992 Acts abolished the ‘binary line’ between the university and public sectors, leading to a massive increase in participation and the number of universities.

Expansion of the university sector allowed the Government to increase competition in its drive for effectiveness and efficiency. The intention was to create a ‘level playing field’ where competition within the enlarged university sector would benefit higher education’s customers (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996). The administration of a unified higher education sector eased the Government burden and “*system-wide problems of state steerage*” (Barnett, and Bjarnason, 1999, p.94) inherent in attempting to regulate two separate sub-sectors each with different financial structures and quality arrangements.

The abolition of the binary line also served the desire of the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics (CDP) to be freed from a “*positively poisonous*” (Price, 1996, p.245) relationship with local authority control borne from resource conflicts. The Conservative government was sympathetic to the CDP aspiration (Bauer and Henkel, 1999) for it had been convinced that the public sector could provide quality-assured,

low unit cost, expansion of educational provision (Kogan, 2002) and also because it would lead to the constraint of local government power (Henkel, 2000).

Conservative Government intervention in the 1980s and 1990s period influenced the “*purpose, shape and size*” of the sector (Schuller, 1995, p.12). Linked to this ‘massification’ was the introduction of increased regulation (Henkel & Little, 1999). In 1991 the then CVCP (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals) chairman, Professor Martin Harris, summed up the approach as “*an attempt to achieve simultaneously three policy objectives: to increase access to higher education, to constrain public expenditure severely and to maintain quality*” (Miller, 1995, citing Harris, 1991).

2.5 Managerialism

In seeking to ensure value for money, Conservative Governments placed heavy emphasis on managerial control, with managerialism closely associated with the key values of accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency (Henkel, 2000; Cuthbert, 1999). This commitment was promoted at the expense of professionalism (Henkel, 2000), with academics considered to be “*a vested interest to be controlled*” (Kogan 2002, p.52). This had become more achievable owing to the creation of a legislative framework that underlined the authority of the sector’s primary resource provider.

The influence of central control on both the sector and its constituent institutions had led to the academic community being “*bitterly hostile*” (Trow, 1996a, p.218) to a Government that had overseen severe budgetary constraint; increasingly eroded institutional autonomy; and which had pursued the growth of direct management in institutions. However, although universities were on the defensive, the reality of increased central control meant that the task for Principals was to “*decide what positions must be defended and what cannot be*” (Swinnerton-Dyer, 1996, p.239).

2.5.1 The Jarratt Report

A key move towards managerialism came in the form of the 1985 CVCP (Jarratt) Report of the Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in Universities. The Report was published after a clear indication from the Secretary of State in 1984 that universities, like other public services, should be scrutinised in terms of their efficiency (Henkel, 2000).

The Jarratt Report made recommendations covering a variety of issues relating to the governance, management and leadership of institutions (Lockwood, 1987). It highlighted that *“the major contributing factor to institutions’ problems in managing efficiently was the uncertainty created by the government’s own lack of planning and its inconsistent policy stance”* (McNay, 1992, p.9). Of course, the Government would later adopt a clear, planned policy stance, as evidenced by the 1988 and 1992 Acts referred to earlier.

In advocating that value for money could be achieved by streamlined but stronger managerial control (Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Middlehurst, 1988), the Jarratt Report *“to some extent crystallised and disseminated ideas based on managerialism”* (Henkel, 2000, p.54). Hostile to departmental autonomy, the transfer of power to the central institution was *“given its clearest mandate by Jarratt”* (Kogan, 2002, p.57), calling for institutional leaders to adopt the position of chief executive and to use new methods of strategic institutional management (Cuthbert, 1992; Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996; McNay, 1995).

Although the Committee was an efficiency study, its *“emphasis on management immediately affects the functioning of the academic enterprise”* (Middlehurst 1988, p.139). This is highlighted by Morrell’s (1992) consideration that the resulting replacement of committees with management groups *“meant that with the bathwater of committees have gone out the babies of consensus, involvement and identification with policy”* (p.17), removing the links of meaning and purpose with the departments in *“inherently centrifugal institutions”* (p.17).

This period was “a ‘revolution’ involving the ‘emergence of “managerialism” in the governance and direction of British universities ’” (Trow, 1994, p.11). Integral to the managerialist approach was the need for leadership and Jarratt placed a firm emphasis on this (Lockwood, 1987), advocating that senior academics should also clearly be managers. For example, Jarratt recommended that the nomination of Heads of Departments should be endorsed by the Vice-Chancellor, effectively underlining the primacy of managerialism and putting the focus clearly on the latter aspect of Middlehurst’s (1988) definition of the role of senior managers as “*the provision of academic leadership within the faculty combined with responsibility for implementing university policy towards the departments*” (p.140).

It was apparent that the Jarratt-advocated managerialism and the centralisation of power in institutions could create a tension between traditional collegiality and emerging managerialism. However, the true impact of the doctrine was only felt once the legislative framework created by the 1988 and 1992 Acts was in place, with policies of ‘hard’ (Trow, 1994) rather than ‘soft’ managerialism coming to the fore.

2.5.2 Managerialism and the University Sector

This reshaping of higher education, utilising management systems, procedures, and control, placed institutional management in a dominant role, thus eroding the power of the Senate. Hard managerialism elevated accountability over autonomy in both an institutional and sector-wide context. Of course, management was not new to either the sector or its institutions. However, the approach was traditionally one of soft managerialism, focusing on institutional efficiency and the effectiveness of management but protecting autonomy, with managers respecting the values of the institution and its academic staff (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996; Harvey and Knight 1996).

The Government’s intention was to reduce institutional dependence on central funding, being of the opinion that competition for alternative resources would make institutions more autonomous (Bauer and Henkel, 1999). However, although higher education policy led to institutional leaders becoming more powerful, the autonomy

of the institution was limited and framed by higher education policy (Bleiklie, 2002; Henkel, 2000; Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996).

The move to a managerialist approach by universities was based on pragmatism rather than idealism. Greater regulation and financial accountability “*provided internal impetus to more formal mechanisms...*” (McNay, 1995, p.108). To satisfy their external obligations, universities adopted systems of management and managerialist values often contrary to institutional tradition and ethos (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996). This was not an unintentional by-product of Funding Council policies but rather was a core managerialist aim.

A clear example of the encouragement of institutions to internally follow the Government’s managerialist vision for the university sector are the comments of the Chief Executive of SHEFC in 1997. Professor Sizer contended that “*if institutions are to implement strategic change, principals and their senior management teams must be agents for change, capable of carrying plans for change through senates and academic councils, securing ownership and commitment within institutions, and delivering their implementation*” (Sizer, 1997, p.111).

2.5.3 Institutional Managerialism in Universities

As highlighted by McNay (1995) the key issue was “*the location of power and decision making*” (p.110). This statement could be viewed both from the perspective of Government power over the university sector and from the perspective of centrally located power within individual institutions. This is highlighted by Middlehurst (1995) noting “*...the increasing intrusion of the state into university affairs (Tapper and Slater 1992) and the rise of managerialism in universities (Pollitt 1990, Trow 1994)*” (p82).

As highlighted earlier, Jarratt’s efficiency study had an impact for academic issues. Increased Government intervention and revised higher education policy led to institutional change that went beyond organisational restructuring and “*struck at the very culture of higher education*” (Walford, 1991, p.166). This external pressure led

to a situation whereby academics were “*struggling to hold onto the values and modes of working that belong to an elite system...*” (Henkel, 1997, p142).

Managerialism in the institutional arena was embodied in the shift in power from departments to the centre of institutions and was manifested in the “*dominance of systems over academic values*” (Kogan, 2002, p.57). The complexity and volume of externally related decisions and the need to operate within resource constraints eroded the traditional university power structure and placed control closer to the Vice Chancellors and senior officers. (Shattock, 1991; Kogan, 2002). External pressures in the form of a diminishing unit of resource; the expansion in student numbers; the competitive demands of research selectivity; and the accountability of learning and teaching, increased the power of the centre of the university as managers “*sought to move their institutions towards income generation and reputation enhancement*” (Kogan, 2002, p.58).

In 1981 the universities found themselves open to dramatic cuts in the unit of resource. The situation was one whereby “*universities protested bitterly but there were few sympathisers*” (Allen, 1988, p.47). These cuts were followed over subsequent years by recurrent ‘efficiency gains’ (Bird, 1996). Parallel to this, the Government sought to increase the number of graduates in its desire to stoke the economy. The universities found themselves in a situation whereby they actively sought to achieve stipulated increases in student numbers, even at a lower unit of resource, in an effort to ease the traumatic financial situation (Taylor, 2003). This perhaps unavoidable submission to Government’s desires, laid the ground for state managerialism to continue to impact upon the sector.

The importance of government funds to institutions is clarified in Newall’s (2003) outline of current funding arrangements in Scotland. Although the SHEFC grant amounts to less than half of the universities’ income, the various other sources can generally be described as ‘tidal’, with the revenue from service provision cancelled out by the cost of providing the service. Accordingly, universities are “*crucially dependent on SHEFC grant to meet their core costs and when public funding is cut*

they feel the consequences” (146). Moreover, Newall’s outline indicates that 75% of SHEFC funding is accounted for by undergraduate teaching, thus highlighting the clear link between the institutions and external quality assurance measures that discharge accountability for public funding.

Funding restrictions and the expansion in student numbers were not the only changes to the context of the state-sector relationship. The institutional reaction to increasing external demands, such as producing formal corporate planning documentation and ensuring their satisfaction, was to redefine organisational structure and power and move it away from departments towards the centre of the institution (Kogan, 2002). Neave and van Vught (1991) argue that if institutions are required to provide such documentation, they will have little option but to follow a managerial approach to ensure its implementation.

In a Scottish context, SHEFC requires annual submission of university strategic plans addressing teaching, research and resource management over the impending four-year period. Newall’s (2003) neutral commentary on the rationale behind this is that *“strategic plans allow the Funding Council to open a dialogue with an institution whose objectives appear to conflict with Executive policy. They are a toll of accountability, showing how public funds for higher education are managed strategically”* (p.145).

Research selectivity and the quality assurance of learning and teaching, and the resulting assessment of academic performance, gave power to the centre of the university. Power moved from the academic community to facilitate managerial accountability in a situation where *“academics began to prepare accounts of their work to be monitored by those at the institutional centre”* (Kogan, 2002, p.58).

Increased institutional management led to greater control of the academic workforce and an according erosion of individual academic autonomy (Cuthbert, 1999), challenging the *“traditions of collegiality and collaboration, autonomy and individual freedom, committee and consensus decision-making”* (Middlehurst, 1995,

p.77). Thus, as the power of institutional managers increased, a significant task for the centre of the university was that of retaining the confidence of the academic community and its identification with the institution (Henkel & Little, 1999). A key role in this was that of the Head of Department, who had “*to carry the department with them*” (Kogan, 2002, p.60) in satisfying increasingly managerial endeavours.

2.5.4 Managerialism and the ‘Public Sector’ Institutions

The 1992 Act not only enlarged the university sector but also meant that the former public sector institutions and the traditional university sector would have to react to the same policy pressures. However, although the policy demands were ostensibly the same, it appeared that, generally, the impact of the managerialism was less of a cultural change for the post-1992 universities.

As highlighted earlier, unlike the ‘autonomous sector’ universities, the ‘public sector’ was more closely linked to Government. In England, the ‘public sector’ of polytechnics and colleges was closely linked to local authority control. In Scotland there were non-university institutions comparable to the polytechnics found elsewhere in the UK (Barnett and Bjarnason, 1999). In 1901, Scottish Education Department guidelines allowed the establishment of these Central Institutions. With a mission of delivering high quality vocational education, the management of these government-funded institutions was devolved to governors who would represent local interests (Murray, 1999).

External authority meant that such institutions were firmly structured on the basis of accountability not autonomy (McNay 1995; Henkel, 2000; Foster and King, 1999). Internal management followed this approach, with institutional heads being Directors rather than occupying the traditional university first among equals Vice Chancellor position (Price, 1996). Further, as local authority control was removed, greater power passed to institutional leaders (Foster and King, 1999). Thus, autonomy limited by external control and the strong centralisation of institutional management were not unfamiliar concepts for the new universities.

2.6 The Quality Assurance of Learning and Teaching

2.6.1 Pressure for Increased Accountability

A key aspect of the changes in higher education public policy was the external accountability of the quality of learning and teaching provision. The Conservative Government regarded "*Quality Assessment as a central part of its higher education reforms*" (SHEFC, 1992a, p.1) for a number of reasons. It wished to expand the sector, in terms of the number of universities, but did not want to face claims that this would dilute academic standards (Henkel, 2000). Also, it could be argued that funding-linked assessments of quality would discourage universities from claiming that increased student numbers and a declining unit of resource had adversely affected standards.

The assessment of teaching quality linked with the core Conservative Government objectives of achieving value for money (Barnett and Bjarnason, 1999) and making publicly funded organisations accountable to key stakeholders, including the state (Henkel, 2000). Higher education was not uniquely singled out for Government attention. Rather, this focus was simply the next stage in a consistent approach to public policy. Also, prior to the abolition of the binary line, the Government was conscious that the university sector was subject to a lesser degree of external accountability than polytechnics (Moodie, 1991), despite the state being the principal source of funding for both sets of institutions.

The Government had no desire to allow the enlarged sector to be self-regulating, owing to the substantial amount of money it obtained from the state. Essentially, TQA "*was born out of government conviction that institutions were not going to develop a system that was effectively accountable*" (Henkel, 2000, p.75).

2.6.2 Pre-Emptive Increases in Self-Regulation

The Government focus on quality and accountability did not come as a surprise to the university sector. Sensing a move towards increased external accountability, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), effectively the UK university employer and trade association, endeavoured to "*pre-empt anticipated*

government action by taking initiatives of its own" (Henkel, 2000, p.69) and establish that the university sector could self-regulate. The 1985 Jarratt Report was only one of several, largely unsuccessful, attempts in the 1980s by the CVCP to jockey for position with Government and prove that the sector could self-regulate.

In terms of the assurance of quality and standards, the first step was the 1986 CVCP (Reynolds) Report on Academic Standards in Universities, which established codes of practice aimed at reinforcing the traditional external examiner mechanism (Trow, 1996a; Henkel, 2000; Kogan and Hanney, 2000). Although the 1987 'Meeting the Challenge' White Paper (Department of Education and Science, 1987) recognised the contribution made to the maintenance and improvement of quality by the CVCP work to-date, it stated that the "*universities, individually and collectively, should do more to reassure the public about the ways in which they control standards*" (p.16). Further, the Government would "*maintain its own concern with the preservation and enhancement of quality in teaching*" (p.16). The White Paper having set out the enhancement of quality as a prime objective, stated that the "*maintenance of high standards of teaching can be helped by systematic arrangement*" (p.18). It was clear that self-regulation would not entirely satisfy Government accountability requirements.

The CVCP's "*greatest anxiety*" (Henkel, 2000, p.70) was that the Government would impose an HMI inspection system upon the university sector. The 1989 CVCP (Sutherland) Report on 'The Teaching Function: Quality Assurance' led to the creation in 1990 of a CVCP Academic Audit Unit which focused on the assurance and development of academic quality in universities. The Academic Audit Unit was a "*defensive strategy*" (Henkel, 2000, p.68) that attempted to "*head them off*" (Barnett and Bjarnason, (1999, p.94) but was unsuccessful, given that the 1992 Act established an external mechanism (Bauer and Henkel, 1999). [The Academic Audit Unit was later renamed the Division of Quality Audit and became part of university-sector owned Higher Education Quality Council.]

2.6.3 'Public Sector' Experience of Quality Assurance

Views of the CVCP and its public sector equivalent, the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics (CDP), differed on external accountability, the former being more strongly opposed to quality assessment than the latter (Henkel, 2000). However, the divide was much greater on the matter of HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) involvement, with the CVCP "*implacably opposed to an inspectorate*" whereas the CDP was "*ambivalent*" (Henkel, 2000, p.73).

This disparity can be traced to the differing level of external accountability experience of each sector. As a result, whilst the pre-1992 universities were hostile to the proposed TQA process, the "*new universities saw in the scheme a return to the earlier practices of the CNAA*" (Murray, 1999, p.148). Extrapolating Murray's discussion of a post-1992 Scottish university, it could be argued that there was a belief within the new universities that they "*would be rated excellent in the assessment of their teaching*" (Murray 1999, p.149). Indeed, Brennan and Shah (2000a) considered that staff in post-1992 universities believed that they knew what to expect, with assessment "*akin to a familiar ritual*" (p.92). Further, Drennan (2000) asserts that "*staff in the post-1992 institutions may have hoped that the TQAs would be their 'revenge'*" (p.90), giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their quality in teaching, whereas the RAE favoured the better resourced pre-1992 universities.

Such confidence would not be unexpected given their considerable experience in satisfying external accountability for learning and teaching. Established in 1964, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was the principal validator of awards from public sector institutions, operating peer group approval and maintenance of programme standards (Brennan, 1989). In addition to this CNAA experience, Her Majesty's Inspectorate monitored academic work (Moodie, 1991).

It should be noted that even before joining the enlarged Scottish university sector, the institutions that would become post-1992 universities had, over a period of time, gradually gained greater autonomy through delegated authority from the CNAA.

2.6.4 Quality Assurance Policy

Inherent in the changes proposed by the 1987 'Meeting the Challenge' White Paper (Department of Education and Science) was the aim of improving quality and efficiency but it was evident that with this came tension regarding the external accountability of learning and teaching.

The White Paper stated that "*Quality in higher education depends upon the commitment of the academic community to the maintenance and improvement of standards*" (p.16). It also recognised that such standards "*cannot be created or imposed from the outside*" (p.16). However, it also underlined that "*the Government on behalf of the public can and will seek to ensure that the systems are in place to promote and give effect to that commitment and to monitor results*" (p.16).

Whilst views may vary in universities as to the absolute right of Government to assess the provision of what could be perceived as autonomous institutions, some would probably concede that the considerable financial support provided by Government meant that a level of accountability was justified. However, the truly contentious point was how appropriate, in terms of both policy and process, the approach adopted would be.

Having enacted the White Paper in the form of the Education Reform Act 1988, the next major development was the May 1991 White Paper 'A New Framework' (Department of Education and Science, 1991). As well as abolishing the binary line it proposed that integral to each of the newly created Higher Education Funding Councils would be a Quality Assessment Committee with the purpose of advising each Council on the quality of learning and teaching provision in institutions. It was envisaged that the Councils would create a common approach to quality assessment through co-operation. The Government saw the separate Funding Councils maintaining, UK-wide, the general policy on higher education whilst allowing particular territorial circumstances, such as the Scottish four-year honours degree, to be taken into account.

Through legislation the Government would loosely tie funding to the quality assessment of teaching, with the Funding councils required to take note of teaching quality assessments when making funding decisions. The Government stated that it sought to see higher education *“continue to expand efficiently...while maintaining quality”* (Department of Education and Science, 1991, p.1). As in the 1987 White Paper, the Government acknowledged the primacy of academics in defining and maintaining standards but underlined the need for external assessment. The 1991 White Paper stated that the *“prime responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning rests with each individual institution”* (p.24). However, again, it underlined that *“there is a need for proper accountability for the substantial public funds invested in higher education”* (p.24).

The proposals in the 1991 White Paper were enacted as the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992. Linking with the earlier discussion on the managerialist control of the university sector by the Government, it could be argued that this legislation not only led to the external review of learning and teaching provision but that it also eroded university autonomy, and raised the spectre of academic staff *“deprofessionalisation”* (e.g. Fulton 2001, p.1), by encroaching upon matters that institutions and their staff previously self-regulated. Indeed, Reed (2001) considers the managerialist background to the higher education public policy changes as being *“grounded in a detailed critique of the established institutional structures and organisational forms within higher education that articulates their endemic [his emphasis] lack of accountability, economic stability, managerial effectiveness and operational efficiency”* (p.1).

Further, it could be argued that TQA illustrated the transition in the operation of the funding body. In the broader context, the removal of the *“septic tank”* (Kogan 2000, p.3) role of the UGC in buffering the sector and the state, and the state-sector exchange relationship being replaced by policy attuned to *“the heroic standards of ministers”* (p.1), led to the widely held view that the Funding Councils acted as

agents of the state (e.g. Tapper and Salter, 1997) *“implementing the government’s predetermined objectives through second order policies”* (Scott, 1995, p.27).

2.6.5 Concerns of the Academic Community

Although the Government had clearly stated that universities should retain the prime responsibility for quality and that core to the assessment of learning and teaching was a constructive relationship with HEIs, *“the founding of that system on lack of trust between government and academe was always going to make it hard to reconcile these aims”* (Henkel, 2000, p.75).

Prior to TQA, the university sector had considered quality to be an integral part of *“individual and institutional academic autonomy”* (p.68) but external assessment had struck at the core of self-regulation (Henkel, 2000). Even those accepting the rationale for public accountability might not agree with the consequences that this brought (Henkel, 1997, p.142).

A source of discontentment was the use of assessment results. The media produced league tables based upon these, encouraging competition (Bauer and Henkel, 1999) as it became evident that performances had *“tangible significance for institutional and departmental reputations”* (Henkel, 2000, p.79). This was especially so given that the status of league tables was such that *“a frozen moment becomes reified for several years”* (Morley, 2002). This underlined the existence of the new higher education ‘market’ and that *“reputations on all sorts of new counts mattered”* (Henkel, 2000, p.79).

It has been argued by Cuthbert (1999) that the broader bureaucratisation and standardisation in higher education have encouraged performance measurement and league tables, acting to *“circumscribe academic autonomy”* (318). TQA can be viewed in the light of the ‘criteria power’ and ‘operational power’ concepts referred to by Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) and Winstanley et al (1995). Increased stakeholder criteria power, in terms of defining aims, performance levels and evaluation methods, was evident in Government pressure regarding the clarification

of standards and the requirement for quality assessment. Although institutions retained operational power to decide how a service was provided and how to allocate their own resources, the external pressure was such that this operational power had to be used at least in part to satisfy the criteria power requirement.

It is argued that although there was considerable and genuine discussion regarding the quality assurance processes, the conflict between accountability and autonomy remained the core concern. Indeed, according to Henkel (2000), the Chairman of the HEFCE Quality Assessment Committee, in response to continued sector critiques, implied that “*it was the principle of external assessment rather than the process that continued to be contested*” (80).

2.7 SHEFC TQA

2.7.1 The Statutory Duty to Undertake Quality Assessments

The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council was established under the terms of the Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) 1992. Its mission was to “*promote the quality and encourage the expansion of teaching and research in Scottish higher education institutions through the efficient and effective use of public funds...*” (SHEFC, 1993a, p.1).

Regarding quality assurance, SHEFC was “*obliged by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 and the Letter of Guidance from the Secretary of State to undertake assessments and to have regard to the outcome of such assessments when determining funding for institutions*” (SHEFC 1992a, p.1). In line with the White Papers of 1987 and 1991, SHEFC acknowledged the prime role of academia in matters of quality but underlined its accountability intentions, aiming to “*balance the need to achieve accountability for the most effective use of Council funds with a recognition of institutional autonomy*” (p.1). The process used to achieve this was the Quality Assessment of Teaching, which became known as TQA.

2.7.2 Initial Developmental Discussions

Discussion and consultations on the development of the TQA process were initially dealt with by the then Scottish Office Education Department (SOED), prior to the establishment of SHEFC.

In March 1992 Scottish universities received a variety of discussion papers relating to the higher education reforms. The purpose of these papers was to allow individual institutions to comment on matters prior to their consideration by joint working groups drawn from the higher education institutions. Regarding this thesis, the key document was 'Discussion Paper F: The Assessment of Teaching Quality in Higher Education Institutions in Scotland' (SOED, 1992a). This set out the general objectives of quality assessment as being:

- to assess the quality of educational provision and the standard of students' performance;
- to analyse and evaluate assessment and other evidence in institutions in order to monitor trends in the general level of quality of provision and its relationship to resource requirements;
- to produce brief reports which would identify salient strengths and weaknesses, promote good practice and stimulate necessary improvements;
- to advise SHEFC on the relative quality of provision in institutions;
- to monitor the implementation of recommendations in earlier reports and encourage progressive improvement, by a programme of re-visiting;
- to form the basis of advice to SHEFC on the promotion and maintenance of quality through innovations and developments in curriculum, teaching and students assessment practice; and

- to inform customers such as students and employers on the quality of provision on offer thereby promoting competition and choice.

(SOED, 1992a, p.3)

From this early point it is apparent that subject level assessment was more closely tied to accountability, with the focus resting more on the underlying legal requirement than quality enhancement. Of course, it could be argued that establishing accountability would lay the groundwork to enable the assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching provision.

2.7.3 Teaching Quality Pilot Projects

The spring of 1992 also brought, in Scotland and across the UK, Teaching Quality Pilot Projects. A Joint Working Group was created to assess and define the criteria and factors upon which the pilot assessment would be undertaken. The broad membership of the Joint Working Group included representatives from the PCFC, the CVCP and the UFC. It was hoped that the Pilots would provide a practical reference to forthcoming discussions on the appropriateness of the quality assessment methodology. Four Scottish institutions participated in the Pilot review of the broad areas of Business and Engineering.

In line with the aims stated in Discussion Paper F, the Joint Working Group agreed that the principal mission of the exercise was to develop and evaluate a method *“of assessing and reporting on the quality of teaching and standards of learning...in order to inform funding decisions”* (HMI, 1992, p.4). Thus, the focus on accountability, rather than assurance and enhancement, was reiterated.

The main issues brought to the fore by the Teaching Quality Pilot Projects were highlighted in a subsequent May 1992 Evaluation Report (SOED, 1992b). The SOED felt that trial and consultation would bring discussion then agreement. However, the concerns of the universities and their staff were being voiced in the press. For example, the Times Higher Educational Supplement reported that: *“The Association of University Teachers Scotland and the Educational Institute of*

Scotland...warned that it would be disastrous for funding decisions to be taken on the basis of questionable judgements, and have urged a full debate to ensure that SHEFC's methodology has the confidence of all concerned" (THES, 1992b, p.3). It was also reported that the pilot exercise was "*condemned by educationalists as impractical, too costly and superficial*" (p.3), and that there was "*widespread dismay in Scotland over the pilot teaching quality assessment exercise*" (THES 1992a, p.3).

The Evaluation Report on the Pilots gave detailed conclusions on items ranging from documentation to training. It found that there were two principal overlapping functions for the assessments, these being to inform SHEFC to enable it to take funding decisions and to assist institutions to "*maintain and enhance the quality of provision*" (SOED 1992b, p.3). However, a number of issues regarding the detail of the process were raised.

The Evaluation Report recommended that whilst the sector was being consulted on matters of detail such as the appropriateness of the assessment scale and the desire to avoid the requirement for assessment documentation becoming too standardised, arrangements for the 1992-1993 cycle should continue to be made. It could be argued that this was a clear indication that although discussion could continue, this would not slow the implementation of the process.

2.7.4 Policy and Process Debates

The debates relating to SHEFC TQA could be categorised into policy and process issues. For the remainder of the 1992-2002 period the university sector would raise policy issues, focusing on the burden placed upon institutions by a methodology that required separate audit and assessment mechanisms to operate. Further, it is argued that this policy debate was a manifestation of the wider political tension between satisfying accountability to Government and maintaining institutional autonomy. Parallel and indeed often linked to the discussion on policy debate, was the process debate. Universities challenged the detail of the subject level assessment process in an attempt to make, in their view, TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, more relevant and appropriate.

The key difference in opinion between Government, agencies and the university sector, are evidenced in the June 1992 Conference of Scottish University Principals declaration that “...whilst the Principals readily accept the case for external assessment of some kind they do not believe that the proposed scheme is practicable” (CSUP, 1992, p.1). The statement concluded that the universities were very willing to work with SHEFC to “devise a better and more cost-effective approach...based on good practice which is already available in universities” (p.1).

The above comments do more than illustrate discontentment with the methodology. They also show that the universities were as adept as SHEFC at politically sensitive negotiations. SHEFC continually acknowledged that for the system to be accepted and successful, universities had to participate in its development. While this was very likely a genuine belief of the best way forward, it must also be noted that it would have been a major step for SHEFC to impose a system without appropriate consultation of the university sector. Similarly, the university sector would have found itself in an untenable position had it rejected external accountability or failed to offer to participate continually in consultations on the way forward. Such a stance would have provided justification for SHEFC to impose a system in order to satisfy its statutory requirement to undertake quality assessments. It was clear that the policy debate had a direct relationship to the accountability-autonomy tension as well as to methodology and process.

Although the requirement for accountability was not publicly a source of conflict, the proposed mechanism for its achievement was. From this early point in the SHEFC TQA period, universities were unhappy about a number of process matters, including the relevance of the ‘snapshot’ approach of short assessments; the opportunity cost involved in releasing vital staff; and the appropriateness of the then three-point assessment scale. Some institutions were also unhappy with the reports being used to inform students, feeling that the relationship was more complex than the business/consumer model. Nor did some HEIs agree that quality assessment should be used as a basis for encouraging competition, preferring that HEIs work together to maintain and improve the standards in the sector. Generally, universities felt that an

alternative model could be built upon the existing systems of internal self-assessment and external peer review (Group on Quality Assessment, 1992; The Universities of Scotland, 1992).

Of course whilst the above points were genuine concerns, they were also useful in the on-going debate and bartering with SHEFC. For example, although there were problems with a short, external, snapshot of provision, it could be argued that universities would not necessarily have wanted longer visits, unless of course they became internal rather than external mechanisms. Further, although there may have been an opportunity cost involved in releasing staff, institutions were financially compensated by SHEFC for this, and the universities would have preferred an external system based upon peer review than an inspectorial approach. This is not to suggest that these were not valid points, but just in the way that SHEFC was approaching negotiations, the universities were keen to negotiate incrementally rather than make wholesale concessions, especially given that the legislation prescribed a move to greater accountability.

2.7.5 A UK Perspective

Although the Scottish system of TQA differed in detail from the rest of the UK, a similar process of negotiation was taking place across the UK between the Funding Councils and the universities that they significantly financed. The CVCP, which also represented the UK university sector, commented on a Consultative Paper issued in October of 1992 by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) on quality assessment following the Teaching Quality Pilot Projects.

The CVCP recognised that progress was being made but felt that the system was not a satisfactory basis on which to assess quality and whilst it acknowledged that the Funding Councils had a statutory obligation to carry out assessments, CVCP was not aware of any formal instruction to introduce a system before its basis and methods had been fully developed and agreed upon by all parties concerned. The CVCP was concerned that an inadequate system could have detrimental consequences for institutions assessed under it. The CVCP reiterated its opinion that institutions

should have proper and effective internal systems in place already and that the Funding Councils could rely on these (CVCP, 1992). It is evident that across the UK the debate about the nature of TQA continued on two fronts: from the policy perspective of external review versus self-regulation (or accountability versus autonomy) and from a process perspective that focused on the detailed operation of the proposed mechanism.

A key issue was timing. The universities were keen that as much time as necessary should be taken to enable appropriate discussions, as indicated by the CVCP comments above. Indeed, aware of the political danger of appearing to impose a system, Sir Graeme Davies, then Chief Executive of HEFCE, had already acknowledged that consultation was essential stating that *“After completion of the pilot studies the detailed way forward will be the subject of consultation so as to ensure the maximum of integrity and acceptability”* (CUA, 1992, p.5).

However, as time wore on the Government was less tactful, with the Further and Higher Education Minister Tim Boswell stating that fine-tuning and continuous enhancement were necessary but that the Government were *“determined to get this show on the road”* (Boswell, 1993, p.4). He underlined that, regarding quality, higher education had to be accountable as well as autonomous, and that this would require effort and perhaps the sacrifice of some professional pride. He was also of the view that institutions that already took quality seriously had nothing to fear and that there should not be too great an increase in burden. It was clear that for the Government, the policy debate argument that the chosen methodology was inappropriate was a manifestation of the conflict between accountability and institutional autonomy. The implementation of legislation and the resulting drive to put TQA into practice with only a modicum of genuine, or at best strictly time-limited, consultation with the university sector, underlined that the Government saw accountability as having primacy over institutional autonomy.

2.7.6 The Introduction of SHEFC TQA

In October 1992 SHEFC decided to introduce quality assessment on the basis proposed in the August 1992 consultation paper 'Assessment of Quality of Provision of Education in Higher Education Institutions' (SHEFC, 1992b). Subsequent to this consultative step, SHEFC felt that there was a general measure of agreement on a variety of issues ranging from the acceptance, given some constructive criticism, of the quality assessment framework, to consensus that the length of the first assessment cycle should be five years (SHEFC, 1992c). However, SHEFC had in August 1992 acknowledged that "*while institutions accepted the principle of quality assessment they believed that the methodology was not practicable in the form adopted*" (SHEFC, 1992b, p.6). It was evident that criticism of the ability of the process to undertake the quality assessment task lingered. Indeed, specific issues including the likely operating costs and the overlap with audit and accreditation remained (SHEFC, 1992b, p.6).

Regarding implementation, SHEFC stated that "*the positive nature of the institutional responses gave the Council confidence in making this important decision*" (SHEFC 1992b, p.1) and highlighted that modification had been made to address some of the specific concerns. It appeared that the quid pro quo that the universities received for agreeing to implementation was that a variety of matters would stay on the agenda for discussion. This focus indicated that, at this point in time, agreement on the detail of the assessment process was more achievable than the resolution of the accountability-autonomy policy conflict.

It should be noted that discussions were not always confrontational and were often positive. Indeed, the then Convenor of COSHEP, Professor John Arbuthnott, stated that "*...Scotland's quality assessment system was ahead of that in England, with Scottish institutions leading the way towards institutional self assessment, and a very much lighter touch from SHEFC than HEFCE*" (THES ,1993, p.6).

The principle guide to TQA was the 'SHEFC Quality Assessors' Handbook' (SHEFC, 1993b), which is presented in its October 1993 form as Annex A. The

Handbook built on the experience of the 1992-1993 quality assessments. A revised version of TQA operated in some cognate areas in 1997-98 (SHEFC, 1997a). The review process and key recommendations regarding the later version are presented in section 2.7.8.

The general purposes of SHEFC TQA in essence remained those defined in Discussion Paper F and set out earlier in this chapter. In terms of the operation of the process, TQA was an external system of academic peer review in which cognate-area undergraduate learning and teaching provision was scrutinised by means of visiting institutions and reviewing documentation. Departments prepared a pivotal Self-Assessment document regarding their provision and review teams made judgements against a defined interlocking Quality Framework. The 1992-1993 assessment scale of Excellent, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory was revised to include an additional judgement of Highly Satisfactory from 1993-1994 onwards.

SHEFC recognised that quality was difficult to define and concluded that TQA would be conducted in the context of an institution's own declared aims and purposes. However, "*an operational definition of the concept of educational provision*" (SHEFC, 1997b) was required to guide the process of review and came in the form of the aforementioned Quality Framework. This underpinned the assessment process, guiding the structure of self-assessment documentation, institutional visits and the final report. SHEFC saw the Quality Framework as a mixture of inputs, processes and outputs that would be continually re-evaluated and improved as the cycle progressed. The Framework covered eleven aspects, ranging from Aims and Curricula to Assessment and Monitoring, and incorporated sixty-three individually defined elements.

SHEFC believed that basing the quality assessment process on the formulation of a Self-Assessment document had great merit in that it was an approach already used in industry and one that reflected total quality management practices. It was intended to that it would provide a critical commentary on the provision of the subject-area being assessed. Within the document departments would provide an evaluation of

the provision against the Quality Framework aspects and declare an overall judgement chosen from the TQA assessment scale.

The external assessment element of TQA was conducted by an assessment team typically consisting of a Lead Assessor, three or four Academic Assessors, and one Industrial Assessor. Lead Assessors were appointed by SHEFC, following nominations from institutions, on the basis of reputation and interest in teaching practice and had responsibility for the programme of assessments in their own cognate area. Lead Assessors could be seconded from their institutions on a full-time or part-time basis. Academic Assessors were appointed following a process of nomination by institutions and selection by the Lead Assessor and SHEFC. Generally, academic staff from Scottish institutions filled the role of Academic Assessors. However, where appropriate, and to ensure neutrality, recruitment was also from outwith Scotland.

Upon receipt of the Self-Assessment the Lead Assessor would prepare a brief report on points that could be pursued with the institution. A Pre-Visit would then take place between the Lead Assessor and the department to discuss how these issues could be further considered and to agree upon the representative samples of student work and teaching provision to be assessed. Prior to the main Assessment Visit, members of the assessment team would review core documentation provided by the institution on teaching and the student experience. The initial report made by the Lead Assessor could then be revised in line with the views of the remainder of the assessment team.

The assessment team would, at the end of the visit, reach a provisional decision on quality. Each aspect of the Quality Framework would be graded using the assessment scale and a final summative judgement, again using the assessment scale, would be made. Following the visit, members of the assessment team would produce individual reports which would then be collated into a single report by the Lead Assessor or Team Leader. SHEFC underlined that reports should be "*based on hard*

fact, supported by evidence" (SHEFC, 1993b, p.12). A Post-Visit to the institution by the Lead Assessor would allow matters of factual accuracy to be raised.

Upon Council approval, a formal report would be published which would rate and comment on the quality of provision across five areas covering the eleven aspects of the Quality Framework. A conclusions section would summarise strengths and weaknesses and provide the overall judgement. The report was intended to act as a source of advice to SHEFC and as a mechanism for offering guidance to students and employers on the nature and quality of provision. An additional report, covering further points, would remain confidential to the institution. This was intended to provide feedback to institutions, using the provision of other institutions as a source of comparison. At the end of the cycle, the Lead Assessor would prepare a report providing an overview of the quality of provision in the entire cognate area.

2.7.7 Continuing Discussion and Debate

During the period of the formulation and operation of SHEFC TQA, debate continued and changes in process detail rather than policy were made. The initial intention of visiting only those claiming to be Excellent changed to ensure comprehensive visitation. Also, under pressure from universities, from the 1993/94 round onwards SHEFC agreed to change the three-point scale to four points, adding in the evaluation of 'Highly Satisfactory'. This could be viewed as an example of SHEFC's willingness to listen to the sector. However, again, this was a process rather than policy development. Perhaps ironically, given its alteration was in response to university sector calls, the four point scale itself became a key point in the subsequent policy calls for a single UK quality assessment body, owing to the non-comparability of the grading scale with the rest of the UK.

Despite pressure from universities, the dual systems of HEQC institutional level Audit and SHEFC subject level TQA continued to operate. August 1993 showed how far apart universities were in their perceptions of the evolution of policy and process. In its first Operational Plan, SHEFC continued to focus on its partnership with the sector and on its key objective to "*develop a system of assessing quality in*

teaching and learning, in consultation with institutions..." (SHEFC 1993c, p.11). However, SHEFC stated that although it was sympathetic to some of the reasons behind the HEIs' call for a single body and agreed that duplication should be avoided where possible, it saw a distinct difference between the assessment and the audit of quality, and thus did not see how they could be easily brought together. Even so, SHEFC felt that close consultation with HEIs had led to institutions feeling that, to a certain extent, they had ownership of the quality assessment process.

However, it did not appear that the university sector shared the same ownership belief. In August 1993, the Steering Group of the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (COSHEP), an organisation established in 1992 to "*provide a body which could speak on behalf of all higher education institutions...on issues of common concern*" (COSHEP, 1997), received advice from the Quality Assessment Working Group chaired by Professor Colin Bell, Vice-Principal of the University of Edinburgh. Its critique of the first round of quality assessments was also received by SHEFC. The report indicated that although the universities could not alter the legal obligation upon SHEFC to undertake assessments, and had been unable to gain an internal as opposed to external approach, they were determined to revise certain aspects of the process.

The report on Quality Assessment Methodology made various points. The universities sought to ensure that the broader questions concerning the appropriateness of the policy remained in the spotlight, as did issues about the process used. Regarding policy, continuing concerns were raised regarding the duplication caused by having an assessment body and an audit body. Indeed, the report stated that "*COSHEP has consistently voiced its impatience at the overlap between quality audit and quality assessment which it regards as wasteful of manpower and resources and unnecessarily heavy handed*" (COSHEP, 1993, p.2). Regarding process, whilst the HEIs agreed that the Scottish system, with features such as the comprehensive visitation of institutions, was better than the HEFCE approach, concerns remained regarding the level of consistency that could be achieved when cognate area assessment was undertaken by more than one team.

Further, the process was viewed as being *"bureaucratic, cumbersome and at odds with tried and tested conventions of institutional academic autonomy"* (p.2).

Many of the concerns highlighted in the report ran for the full period of TQA operation. These included concerns regarding the financial and opportunity cost of SHEFC TQA, the inconsistency of judgements, and the recurring review of institutional facilities that applied to each cognate area. The basic conflict was that the sector objected to the burden of the process but SHEFC considered that the elements of the process were essential to ensure that an appropriate level of review was undertaken (COSHEP, 1995c). For example, inconsistency in reporting could, in theory, have been addressed by using a single team but this was logistically impractical. Further, even an increased overlap in team membership could have then conflicted with concerns over the opportunity cost of losing valuable senior staff for long periods.

In terms of the evolution of TQA, it is evident that SHEFC endeavoured to achieve as much academic acceptance of the process as possible and sought to involve the academic community in key activities. For example, senior academic staff were seconded to SHEFC to aid the continuing development of core aspects of the process. Of course, it could be argued that as well as being a valid attempt to have this external system internalised, SHEFC was also politically adept in underlining its willingness to involve the academic community. Thus the process evolved in a pragmatic way. However, despite focused work from both SHEFC and senior members of the academic community, policy rather than process remained the core topic of concern.

SHEFC continued in its endeavours to refine the process through both sector consultation and independent evaluation of the operation of the methodology. In August 1993 the SHEFC-commissioned Barnett Report (Barnett, 1993) on the 1992/93 quality assessment process was published. Again, the changes that this led to were related to process rather than policy.

The key debate remained one of policy. Although the SHEFC TQA systems differed in detail to the process operated elsewhere in the UK, a common issue remained the burden of satisfying the dual HEQC and Funding Council mechanisms. The CVCP continued to explore the possibility of a single quality assurance agency, and indeed set up an 'Accountability for Teaching' group (CVCP, 1993), which reported on this matter in March 1995.

While SHEFC and the university sector were in agreement that the system in operation was better than the HEFCE approach, much of the TQA period took the form of the university sector reiterating policy concerns and SHEFC referring to having gained the *"confidence and trust of the higher education sector through determination to consult frequently and to carry out our responsibilities in an open and accountable way"* (SHEFC 1994a, p.2). Whilst there is no doubt that SHEFC desired to achieve the *"further development of quality improvement in partnership with the sector"* (p.8), it clearly remained the stronger partner owing to its legal obligation and apparent pressure from Government to keep to a timescale.

In June 1994 SHEFC informed institutions that a Documentation Group had been established to look at *"ways in which the self-assessment supplementary documentation submitted to SHEFC might be rationalised and streamlined"* (SHEFC 1994b, p.1). Again this had a focus on process rather than policy. In addition SHEFC continued to highlight its belief that discussions had resulted in the process gaining the confidence of the sector but was aware of initial hostility (SHEFC 1994a, p.4). Regarding this latter point, SHEFC stated that *"one of the main factors limiting the success of quality assessment was the climate of suspicion and mistrust, often associated with scepticism around the objectives set for quality assessment"*. However, it believed that *"an acknowledgment of the pluralistic nature of higher education institutions"* and *"dealing openly and transparently with the political aspects of quality assessment"* (p.4) together with a willingness to modify the process had tackled such negative feelings.

Despite SHEFC's view, the university sector in Scotland and across the UK endeavoured to maintain pressure regarding key deficiencies that had been identified. The CVCP July 1994 press release, 'Universities Reaffirm Responsibility for Guaranteeing Standards' (CVCP, 1994), entailed an eleven point plan. Pivotal was the aim of creating "*a single agency with responsibility for all aspects of quality*" (p.2). The audit/assessment trade-off being that "*where, for an institution, HEQC is unable to give an unequivocal assurance and expresses some cause for concern, there shall be a follow-up assessment on a subject/programme basis*" (p.2). This solution to the policy conflict over methodology and its resulting burden would also have revised the accountability-autonomy balance, given that HEQC was a university-owned body and not a Government agency.

Politically, the university sector was seeking to ensure that it continued to shape the quality assurance policy agenda and debate even if it did not have the legal backing that the Funding Councils enjoyed. Specifically, the sector was keen to ensure that it could show a single way forward that would, in principle, cover the same ground as the existing external realities of audit and assurance whilst allowing the Funding Councils to satisfy their legal obligations.

It was vital that the sector was not accused of seeking to avoid accountability. Accordingly, the press release clarified that any system would have to provide information about institutional quality to stakeholders and satisfy the Funding Councils' need for accountability. Although it was not certain that a single quality body would be established, the universities intended that if it was, it would follow the less onerous institutional audit model, with subject level assurance as a safety net assessment utilised when audit had raised serious concerns.

The pressure from the university sector for policy change continued when in December 1994 COSHEP made a formal request for the SHEFC Quality Assessment Committee to recommend that an independent review of the quality assessment process be commenced in time for views to be incorporated for the next cycle of assessments. COSHEP agreed with SHEFC on the common purpose of assuring

quality in teaching but was not convinced that the current system met this aim (COSHEP, 1994).

COSHEP called for a joint SHEFC-COSHEP review that would consider the SHEFC quality assessment arrangements from 1993-96, take into account prior consultations, and look at other UK developments in quality assessment and audit, in order to propose principles on which the next cycle should be based. Although consideration of the process was at the core of the proposed SHEFC-COSHEP review, the aim of examining other UK audit/assessment discussions ensured that policy would remain part of the focus given that England might create a single audit/assessment body, leaving the way open, the universities hoped, for a future single audit/assessment process to be operated across the UK.

Developments in March 1995 illustrated the continuing dual policy and process debates. With regard to the detail of the TQA process, the month brought the publication of a SHEFC-commissioned review of operational and administrative matters regarding the 1993/94 assessments (Moray House Institute of Education, 1995). As with the earlier Barnett Report, some process recommendations were taken on board whilst others were rejected in favour of the existing methods.

In terms of the policy debate, momentum increased regarding university sector calls for a complete review of the approach to quality assurance. In the light of discussions in England on quality assurance policy, COSHEP asked the Secretary of State for Scotland for a review to look at the possibility of having a single agency. Although COSHEP focused on the prohibitive cost of maintaining audit and assessment as separate elements, there was also a clear desire that the HEIs should be the principal owners of any system. COSHEP wanted a single agency covering the UK, based on HEQC, but also meeting the statutory requirement for quality assessment. COSHEP stated that such an approach would continue to inform the higher education sector and facilitate maintenance and improvement of standards (COSHEP, 1995a).

The reply from the Secretary of State for Scotland was that while he accepted that a single body might reduce this cost, he was unconvinced that the aims of audit and assessment would be as well satisfied as by the current set-up (COSHEP, 1995b). However, dialogue and political manoeuvring continued. COSHEP accepted an offer by the Secretary of State for Scotland to meet with the SOED. Before this meeting took place it was clear that in England HEFCE would not accept a plan to use HEQC as a basis for a new agency without its constitution and membership being altered. Although progress was made in England on the move to a single body for audit/assessment, it was evident that the universities would have to incorporate significant external elements within any new sector-owned agency.

Nonetheless, it appeared that England was further down the road that COSHEP wished to travel. COSHEP hoped to convince the SOED that the current system was flawed and that SHEFC had not listened to recent calls for change, no matter how constructive they were. Meanwhile, despite a continuing conflict over policy, the TQA process continued to evolve through dialogue between the Funding Council and the university sector.

Universities throughout the UK continued to push for a single quality assurance body. In June 1995 the CVCP wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment stating that a UK process was more agreeable than the existing arrangements. Meanwhile, in August 1995 COSHEP reiterated its view that the current system had serious flaws. It considered that a single UK wide system was required as any divergence, especially in terms of assessment scale, from the UK would make Scotland misunderstood in the wider international context. Further, a single method of accountability would reduce duplication and costs.

Also in August 1995, SHEFC was asked by the Scottish Office to comment on the CVCP proposals for a single quality agency (SOED, 1995). SHEFC was of the view that the present system of quality assessment could be altered to cover quality audit. Further, operation by SHEFC would ensure a respect for and, understanding of, the distinctiveness of the Scottish sector in both the assessment and audit of quality.

While the universities had earlier outlined their option of an institutional audit approach that could incorporate safety-net subject level assurance as appropriate, the SHEFC preference was in effect the opposite, with comprehensive subject level assurance incorporating selective institutional audit as appropriate.

The policy debate continued to gain momentum. In September 1995 the Secretary of State for Scotland wrote to SHEFC and COSHEP regarding developments elsewhere in the UK on proposals for a new quality assurance agency. The letter to the SHEFC Chairman suggested that *"there may be scope...for better alignment of [SHEFC's] framework and timetable for the second round of quality assessments with that of other parts of the UK"* (Scottish Office 1995, p.2). This correspondence came shortly after the arrangements for the HEFCE-CVCP Joint Planning Group (see section 2.9) had been approved, after amendment, by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Also in September 1995, the Chief Executive of SHEFC wrote to the Convenor of COSHEP (SHEFC, 1995) reiterating that a revised methodology could be primarily focused on subject level assessment, with institutional audit only used when problems arose. SHEFC was aware of the CVCP/COSHEP view that a UK-wide assessment method was the way forward but was concerned that the existing benefits of the current system, such as the ability to cater for the distinctiveness of Scottish education and the regard given to individual institutional missions, might be lost. SHEFC stated that it would prefer to discuss COSHEP's views on the current system as opposed to moving to a UK-wide system and saw a SHEFC-COSHEP Joint Review Group as a mechanism for this.

Across the UK the policy debate of methodology and burden, a manifestation of the wider accountability-autonomy tension, was eventually formally considered. This discussion, to varying extents, involved the deliberations of two review bodies, namely the SHEFC-COSHEP Joint Review Group (JRG) and the Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (JPG).

2.8 SHEFC-COSHEP Joint Review Group

Established in October 1995, the SHEFC-COSHEP Joint Review Group had a remit of reviewing the operation of the quality assessment system in use in Scotland since 1992 and of advising SHEFC on the future development in this field, taking into account developments in England, Ministerial advice, and the statutory requirement to assess the provision of teaching quality. The focus was one of process rather than policy. Indeed, the remit noted SHEFC's wish to retain subject level assessment. The intention was to consult and debate before implementing revisions in time for the operation of the second cycle of TQA.

Eleven months, eight meetings, and one independent evaluation of participant views later, the Joint Review Group published its report in October 1996 (SHEFC, 1996a). It acknowledged that there had been some overlap between itself and the JPG in membership and that the two bodies had exchanged views and information.

The JRG was of the view that the quality assurance procedures within HEIs had developed over the past few years and felt that quality assessment had played a part in this. Regarding external quality assessment, the JRG felt that whilst the concept had gained widespread support, the actual process had not. The JRG was conscious that unhappiness with the process could damage relations between the HEIs and SHEFC.

Regarding the relationship between quality assessment and quality audit, the JRG saw possible streamlining coming from the development of institutional procedures, a more widely accepted version of quality assessment and a more limited role for quality audit. However, the Group was conscious that its remit did not cover this ground.

Focusing on the issue of the enhancement of the quality of provision, the JRG stated that *"there is a firmly held view in Scottish institutions that the introduction of assessment of the quality of teaching and learning has raised the status of good teaching"* (p.17) but was concerned that an overly-inspectorial approach to

assessment would create difficulties as it clashed with academic autonomy. It noted the views in the COSHEP document 'Quality Assessment 1992-97: the Way Forward' that "*the existing system is much more inspectorial and judgemental rather than developmental, leading to the surprising emergence of a culture of compliance rather than one of continuous improvement*" (p.17). The JRG acknowledged "*a strength of feeling which it would have been unwise to ignore*" (p.17) but was aware that a system that lacked the power to make judgements would be short on credibility and may not benefit the sector.

The JRG felt that bringing the negative feeling to the fore was important "*first, to indicate that the depth and volume of resentment and criticism may have the potential to overwhelm the positive aspects of Quality Assessment, and to undermine its credibility; and, second, to provide an introduction to a more detailed discussion which aims to identify the main basis for this lack of acceptance and criticism of Quality Assessment*" (p.18).

The JRG recommended the adoption of process changes such as linking assessment visits to those of accreditation bodies; the encouragement of more critical self-assessments; reviewing documentation requirements; and revising the core Quality Framework to increase flexibility and transparency.

The JRG noted that the judgement of 'Highly Satisfactory' was introduced "*largely in response to comments from institutions and assessors*" (p.26) but was aware that considerable debate had continued to surround the grading scale, particularly given that it differed from that used in the rest of the UK. The JRG commented that whatever scale was adopted, perhaps the most important issue was to "*ensure that the same gradings are used throughout the UK*" (p.27).

SHEFC later informed institutions of the decision to introduce a revised form of the assessment process. The process was based on the JRG recommendations and would operate in the review of selected cognate areas in the 1997/98 TQA programme. In correspondence to institutions, SHEFC underlined that the revised method of quality

assessment retained the basic principles of self-assessment, peer external review, delineation by cognate area, and publication of reports. The revised method also retained the principle of having an operational definition of quality at the core of the assessment process, guiding the structure of the Self-Assessment document, assessment visit and final report (SHEFC 1997, p.1).

The revised method reconstituted the eleven-aspect Quality Framework into a six-aspect Quality Profile that covered the same range but aimed to provide a “*clear emphasis on those aspects of provision which are most directly relevant to students’ learning experience*” (SHEFC, 1996a, p.2). Each of the six aspects was graded on a scale of one to four, with a higher score indicating a better performance.

2.9 The Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Established in September 1995, the Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (JPG) had the aim of developing proposals for a new agency which would have the primary function of providing a service for assuring the quality of higher education and the standards of programmes and awards for HE institutions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, and if SHEFC decided to contract, in Scotland. The JPG had a membership that included, amongst others, nominees from HEFCE, CVCP, COSHEP, and SHEFC.

The December 1996 Joint Planning Group Report (CVCP, 1996) stated that its proposals tackled the burden of external accountability and intended to aid the improvement of quality as well as providing stakeholders with information and allowing the Funding Councils to satisfy their legislative requirement. The aim of facilitating good practice appeared to be higher on the agenda than at the outset of TQA.

The report proposed that a new single agency with a UK-wide remit should be created as soon as possible. The new agency would undertake both audit and assessment and would attempt to eliminate duplication. Further, institutions would be able to negotiate over the number of reviews, their scope, and timing. The new

agency would fulfil a service contract between itself, the institutions, and the Funding Councils.

It is highlighted that these Joint Planning Group proposals were essentially absorbed into key recommendations of the (Dearing) National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which reported in 1997.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was established in March 1997. The QAA is a body owned by the university sector and has a mission to *“promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced”* (QAA, 1997b, p.12).

Whilst the functions and staff of HEQC and the Quality Assessment Divisions of the English and Welsh Funding Councils were, in due course, transferred to the QAA, SHEFC decided to consider its options regarding contracting its quality assurance obligations to the new agency. SHEFC was confident that the JRG recommendations were sufficient for the quality assurance programme to continue (SHEFC, 1996b). It would also have been aware of the likelihood that contracting with the QAA could lead to a non-JRG path.

2.10 QAA Subject Review

Under pressure to contract with the QAA, SHEFC decided to end the TQA process on completion of the cycle in 1997/98 and participate in the QAA pilots for the new Subject Review process (SHEFC, 1997d). SHEFC later contracted the QAA to undertake subject level assessment on its behalf, using the Subject Review model. Subject Review aimed to ease the burden on institutions by reducing the amount of documentation required and allowing institutions flexibility in choosing when cognate areas were assessed. However, it retained the TQA-related principles of self-assessment, departmental visits and peer review.

The QAA Chairman was clear that easing the burden was a critical issue, stating that the *“QAA had its origins in the JPG report and the recommendations of 1996, when*

the sector was preoccupied with reducing the burden imposed by the existing processes of assessment and audit..." (QAA, 1997b, p.27). However, the QAA recognised that an appropriate balance had to be struck between easing burden and achieving accountability, stating that the *"...new, robust quality assurance arrangements will require a balance to be established between, on one hand, the desirability of developing a partnership with institutions and on the other, the need to deliver well founded judgements on the quality and standards of higher education and its programme awards"* (QAA, 1997a, p 31).

Although the tension between accountability and autonomy was epitomised by the policy conflict regarding methodology and burden, the detail of assessment processes had been important during the operation of TQA and would remain so during the Subject Review period. However, the QAA was confident that its proposals had the backing of the sector, stating that *"We have achieved a remarkable degree of consensus on the way forward"* (QAA, 1998, p.2).

The Subject Review cycle was intended to run from 2000-2006, with Scotland and Wales operating the new processes from academic year 2000/1, and England and Northern Ireland from January 2002. A two-year trial period then commenced in October 1998 and mainly involved institutions in Scotland and Wales because the TQA cycles had been completed there. The QAA refuted claims that Scotland was merely trialling the new process, stating that *"to ensure stability, all funding bodies have been invited to sign up to the new method at this stage, not just those that will use it from 2000-2001"* (QAA, 1999a, p.31).

The Subject Review process is detailed, in the QAA 'Handbook for Academic Review' (QAA, 2000). Academic Review encompassed Subject Review and Institutional Review, which assessed how effective an institution was in managing award standards and programme quality. The Handbook is reproduced in its entirety as Annex B.

Subject Review assessed the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities of programmes taught at sub-degree, undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The focus of the Self-Evaluation documentation; review visits; judgements; and reports was tied to six core elements. These were: subject provision and aims; learning outcomes; curricula and assessment; quality of learning opportunities; student achievement; and maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards.

On a six-year cycle, a staggered programme of Subject Reviews would assess subject level provision and would inform Institutional Reviews of overall systems. Over time, the intensity of review could diminish if an appropriate standard of subject level provision and institutional systems had been evidenced by earlier QAA assessments. The intention was that the overall QAA academic review system would be *“as efficient as possible and will consume no more overall resource than is necessary”* (QAA, 2000, p.2). Key elements were that document duplication would be minimised, with the possibility of information being shared with internal university and non-QAA external reviews, and that institutions could negotiate with the QAA regarding the timing and aggregation of reviews in order to facilitate alignment with other internal or external reviews.

The Subject Review process was undertaken in the context of how the provider satisfied its aims and how these related to external indicators such as Benchmark Statements, the requirements of professional and statutory bodies (PSBs), employer expectations, and the attributes of graduates. It was expected that the aims of provision would be set out as part of a pivotal Self-Evaluation document, establishing a basis for the review to consider the achievement of intended learning outcomes.

Although Subject Review centred on the self-evaluation documents produced by departments, a number of QAA and institutional documents were also integral to the overall process. The Code of Practice, which would be gradually implemented over the 2000-2006 review period, provided *“an authoritative reference point for institutions as they consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic*

quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications" (QAA, 1999b, p.1).

Whilst the rest of the UK operated a separate framework, in Scotland the *'Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland'* applied, given the distinctiveness of its undergraduate provision. The Framework set *"expectations for awards at a given level"* (QAA, 2000, p.15). Using this, a determination could be made as to whether a programme's intended learning outcomes and the resulting student achievement were appropriate for the qualification awarded.

Benchmark Statements developed by subject communities were produced for each of the forty two broad subject areas that Subject Review covered and represented *"general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in a particular subject area"* (p.7). Regarding the Subject Review process, it was expected that institutions would be able to demonstrate that the Benchmark Statements had informed the formulation of a programme's intended learning outcomes. Also, for each course within the cognate area, a Programme Specification, intended as a source of information for a wide range of stakeholders and focusing on the intended learning outcomes, was provided as an annex to the Self-Evaluation.

Subject Review operated a system of peer review. The Review Team consisted of subject specialists, largely provided by higher education institutions. The Review was managed by a Review Co-ordinator, who was not a specialist of the provision being assessed but who had considerable experience of higher education and quality assurance.

In comparison to TQA, the Subject Review process entailed an extended visitation period. It was intended that this would provide the Review Team with a greater opportunity to understand the provision than would be afforded by concentrating the

same amount of time into a shorter period. The Review Team's core responsibility was to *"read, analyse and test the self-evaluation produced by the institution"* (p.7).

Judgements on academic standards were made *"on the appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes set by the subject provider in relation to subject benchmark statements, qualification levels and the overall aims of the provision; on the effectiveness of curricular content and assessment arrangements in relation to the intended learning outcomes; and on actual student achievement"* (p.14). Review Teams would make one of the following three threshold judgements on the academic standard of the provision: Confidence, Limited Confidence, No Confidence.

The Review Team also made individual judgements of Commendable, Approved, or Failing on the quality of learning opportunities in relation to how the following aspects contributed to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes: teaching and learning; student progression; and effective utilisation of learning resources. Exemplary features could be identified with a Commendable categorisation. Provision, overall, would be regarded as Failing if the Review Team had No Confidence in the standards achieved or if any aspect of quality was adjudged to be Failing.

In an effort to ensure credibility with external stakeholders, a key element of Subject Review was that judgements were transparent and publicly reported. It was intended that such reporting would facilitate stakeholders in distinguishing between providers of different programmes. After allowing institutions to comment on matters of factual accuracy, a final report was published after each review and acted as the principal source of feedback to the institution and its academic departments. Identifying strengths and weaknesses, commentaries on the quality of learning opportunities were provided, as were individual judgements for each of the three aspects. A commentary on academic standards highlighted strengths and weaknesses by reference to the Code of Practice, Benchmark Statements, and the Qualifications Framework.

Subject overview reports were to be published when a schedule of reviews had been completed in a subject area. The overview reports would provide a record of Review Team findings and promote good practice. It was intended that this would aid the academic community in its consideration of adjustments to Benchmark Statements.

However, Scotland was in effect a trial ground, for the system found its demise before HEFCE brought it into operation for the universities it funded. In March 2001, apparently in response to complaints from institutions regarding the continuing burden of quality assurance, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced that there would be forty percent less Subject Review activity in the forthcoming Academic Review programme in England than previously planned (QAA, 2002).

The proposed sampling process was clearly unworkable. However, the group (which included HEFCE, SCOP, Universities UK and QAA representation) subsequently set up to redesign the process realised that the Government would not retrace its steps and thus offered a different approach. The QAA reported the matter as follows: *"...given the Agency's evidence of the high quality of higher education provision, there was no need for a further comprehensive and universal external review of subjects in England, provided that institutions' own internal quality assurance mechanisms could be shown to be working effectively and rigorously..."* (QAA, 2002, p.2). With this, the university sector had achieved the creation of both a single quality assurance body and, essentially, a single process of review.

With subject level review abandoned in England, SHEFC had little option but to follow suit, given the pressure from its own university sector to do so. However, SHEFC and the Scottish university sector were keen to devise a model that would ensure that the distinctiveness of Scottish higher education was catered for.

2.11 Enhancement Led Institutional Review

Following the decision to end the UK-wide agreement on quality assurance, SHEFC established a Quality Working Group (QWG), which included representatives from

the Funding Council, Universities Scotland, and the QAA Scottish Office. The remit of the QWG was to consider the HEFCE proposals and advise SHEFC on the way forward for quality assurance in Scotland. Further, Scottish institutions were invited to comment on the HEFCE 'Quality Assurance in Higher Education' (HEFCE, 2001) consultation document.

SHEFC stated that although it wished to ensure that the new approach took into account the nature of Scottish higher education, the enhancement developments in recent years, and the experience of QAA Subject Review, it recognised and shared *"the sector's concern that Scottish Institutions should not be disadvantaged by any new system. A key feature of the proposals is therefore the Council's intention that the reported outcomes in Scotland should, as far as possible, be the same as in other parts of the UK, to ensure comparability"* (SHEFC, 2001, p.1).

At its meeting of 30 November 2001, SHEFC accepted the recommendations of the QWG and agreed proposals regarding the method of quality assurance. The new approach would operate from academic year 2003-2004, following appropriate sector consultation. The SHEFC consultation on 'An Enhancement Led Approach to Quality Assurance' (SHEFC, 2002a) was issued on 28 February 2002. The Enhancement Led Institutional Review approach would generate a core set of outcomes and standards common to institutional quality assurance across the UK. Unlike the HEFCE approach, the SHEFC method would not include sampling at the subject level. Further, the Scottish system would place a distinct emphasis on enhancement, with the operation of a series of engagements on annual themes aimed at identifying and disseminating good practice. The provision of details to stakeholders on the nature and quality of provision would take the form of a public information set. Key to the process would be the internal procedures of institutions for quality assurance enhancement, and the full support and involvement of students in such processes.

Regarding responses to the consultation, SHEFC stated that there was broad support for an enhancement-led approach and *"universal endorsement for the principle...that*

institutions themselves are best placed to monitor and ensure the quality of provision through internal review processes, with these processes being externally monitored through periodic institutional audit” (SHEFC, 2002b).

A draft Handbook for Enhancement Led Institutional Review formed the basis of sector consultation in spring 2003, with a final version published in April 2003.

2.12 Summary

This chapter has set out the context against which research into the influence of subject level quality assessment is set. It has illustrated that during the period of operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review there was a continuing conflict over the policy of quality assurance and the processes of assessment it used.

Although the long running debate on policy, defined by the conflict regarding the burden coming from having to satisfy two quality assurance bodies and two review processes (SHEFC TQA and HEQC/QAA Audit), was one that voiced genuine beliefs, it was also a manifestation of the wider tension between the accountability to Government and the safeguarding of institutional autonomy. The focus on this policy debate throughout the decade did not mean that discussions regarding the subject level assurance processes were neglected but it did ensure that the prime topic was one of policy rather than process.

The relevance of this context to the research, it is argued, is that although SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review had an enhancement function, the environment in which the processes were meant to provide this was less than ideal. Given that the policy was clearly not endorsed by institutions, it was unlikely, despite SHEFC's (and latterly QAA's) belief, that academic staff would feel that they had ownership of the processes used.

This is not to suggest that academic staff, peer reviewers, and institutions themselves did not take the process seriously. However, given that policy rather than process

was the key debate, would the core elements of critical self-reflection and peer review be able to have a positive influence on learning and teaching provision?

In terms of SHEFC TQA alone, would the estimated three hundred peer reviewers bring good practice back to their departments? Would the estimated six thousand staff (SHEFC, 1996a) that had been involved in the process be positively influenced with regard to academic quality?

In short, despite the overwhelming focus on policy conflicts, did the SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review processes lead to an enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis?

Chapter Three will consider previous empirical work relating to the external quality assessment in universities. From this, an identification of a gap in the literature will enable the research question and propositions to be defined and the levels of analysis to be established. Further, underlining the importance and potential influence of the context in which external quality assessment operated, Chapter Three will also explore the literature regarding contextual environmental factors, such as managerialism and university culture, that are closely tied to the higher education public policy developments discussed in the current chapter. Moreover, in highlighting the importance of the interface between internal and external environmental factors regarding what is essentially an externally driven change process, the commonality of experience with the public and private sectors is established, allowing the implications of the research to extend beyond higher education and quality assessment.

Chapter Three

Current Literature

3.1 Introduction

In setting out key findings of previous research on the external quality assessment of learning and teaching provision, this chapter clarifies how previous research has aided the definition of the research question and propositions. Building on this, the chapter will clarify the levels of analysis addressed in the current research.

Chapter Two indicated that both the policy of external accountability and the process of quality assessment were controversial within the university sector. The consideration of literature on university cultures and on state-sector and institution-department managerialism in higher education will add further context to the higher education public policy background set out in Chapter Two. This will provide insight into how the culture of institutions and the perception of state and institutional managerialism may have affected the opportunity for external processes to positively influence institutions and departments.

Further, the consideration of culture, managerialism, and change-focused policy developments will establish a theoretical framework that enables the focused research on external quality assessment in universities to draw broader change management implications applicable to higher education public policy in general and also to the public and private sectors. A clarification of the internal and external environmental factors affecting higher education and the public sector and private sectors will underline the broader relevance of the current research.

3.2 Background to Propositions:

The Influence of External Subject Level Assessment

The increased level of external accountability upon institutions has sparked academic debate on a number of issues regarding academic quality. However, although the wider topic is an active area of debate, and indeed there has been some focused

research on issues directly relevant to this research, this section will establish that the propositions that underpin the current research have not been addressed.

Although much has been written about higher education public policy, analysis of the impacts, according to Kogan and Hanney (2000), has been largely inferential. Indeed, regarding quality assessment, Drennan (2000), highlights the lack of research undertaken. Much of the speculation in the current literature focuses on definitions of academic quality and on setting out proposed approaches to quality assurance (e.g. Barnett, 1992; Goodlad, 1995; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Within this area, others have considered the relevance of applying business processes such as ISO 9000 (Clark and Moreland, 1998) and Total Quality Management (Drennan, 1999) to the educational arena.

Whilst research has been undertaken regarding Funding Council TQA and QAA Subject Review, like the more speculative, generalist discussions this has often been in the context of defining quality and considering the appropriateness of these approaches to assessing and monitoring it. These considerations have often been interwoven with the academic debates in the wider literature highlighted above or considered in the context of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the higher education policies that underpin them (e.g. Brown, 2001). Further, as debates regarding methodologies have developed, some academics have considered the possible implications of emerging forms of quality assurance (e.g. Middlehurst, 2001) and the way forward for international recognition of different national approaches to quality assurance (e.g. Campbell and van der Wende, 2000).

While the above work may provide some general contextual background in terms of the influence of external subject level assessment, there are only four studies with direct relevance to the current research. These are research undertaken by Henkel (2000) and Drennan (2000) and SHEFC-commissioned evaluations of TQA by Sharp et al (1997) and Evaluation Associates Ltd (1998).

Before discussing relevant key findings of the four core studies, a brief consideration of their scope and focus will aid a subsequent clarification that the current research will address a gap in the literature.

The Sharp et al paper is drawn from a SHEFC-commissioned report by Moray House Institute of Education which was part of the on-going evaluation of TQA. Its scope covered SHEFC TQA between 1992/3 and 1995/6 and it presented a profile of opinion principally regarding the content and appropriateness of SHEFC TQA and also considered whether the process was viewed differently among distinct groups.

The Evaluation Associates Ltd study (1998) was also commissioned by SHEFC. Its scope was the revised method that operated in 1997/98 and it sought input from those with experience of this version of the process. The study focused on the operational effectiveness of SHEFC TQA.

Drennan's (2000) research embodies an evaluation of the impact of audit and assessment on the quality of learning and teaching in Scottish universities. Drennan's focus was on the direct impact of Audit and TQA, assessing whether the elements of the process designed to improve the quality of provision were successful and debating the value of Total Quality Management as an alternative approach.

Henkel's (2000) work draws on research undertaken in England between 1994 and 1997, addressing policy reforms regarding CVCP/HEQC Audit, HEFCE TQA and the Research Assessment Exercise. Although the study is not focused on the Scottish experience and its core consideration is how academics have reacted to, and how their working lives and identities have been influenced by, recent higher education public policy developments, views on the influence of HEFCE TQA, which originated from the same higher education public policy developments as SHEFC TQA, offer insight for the current research.

Each of these studies has a distinct focus and scope. However, a detailed analysis has identified overlapping and related findings that, together with elements of less

closely associated but nonetheless contributory research (e.g. Brennan and Shah, 2000a; McDowell et al, 1997) on external quality assessment in universities, aid the definition of the research question and propositions.

As indicated earlier, the UK university sector as a whole was subject to external quality assessment. Accordingly, where relevant, research on related experiences outside Scotland has been considered. Examples include aspects of the aforementioned research by Henkel (e.g. Henkel 2000) and elements of Brennan's individual and collaborative research (e.g. Brennan 2000a) on external quality assessment and accountability. However, as detailed in Chapter Two, the policy and process debates regarding assessment and accountability, though akin to experiences elsewhere, are distinct to Scotland and as such require that specific research be undertaken to enable a distinct research contribution to be made.

As noted in Chapter Two, the external quality assessment of the quality of learning and teaching provision was only one of a number of policy issues affecting UK higher education, a point underlined by Brennan and Shah (2000a). However, whilst this may suggest that it might be difficult to separate out the impact of a particular policy, Henkel's (2000) research led to the view that the external assessment of learning and teaching (in the form of Institutional Audit and HEFCE TQA) had in itself a substantial impact.

Within this, a number of themes can be drawn from previous research. The link between reputation and the importance of performance in external assessments has been highlighted by research both in a UK context (e.g. Brennan and Shah, 2000a; Henkel, 2000) and specifically in relation to SHEFC TQA (e.g. Evaluation Associates Ltd 1998; Sharp et al, 1997). Further, studies focusing on HEFCE TQA have found that the reputation-related performance pressure was stronger for those institutions with greater standing because they had the most to lose (Brennan and Shah, 2000a) and that there was less pressure on post-1992 universities to claim excellence (Henkel, 2000).

The competitive nature of TQA and the associated value attached to league tables has been noted in relation to HEFCE TQA (Taylor 2003; Bauer and Henkel, 1999). Indeed, looking at both audit and assessment, Henkel (2000) found that there was institutional pressure to perform well and that there was an increased role undertaken by the centre of the university regarding external assessment preparations once the importance that performance had for reputations became apparent. Further, Henkel found that external assessment had an increasingly explicit influence on internal quality assurance approaches and fostered a central university perception that there was a need to manage performance. Again, this was in relation to experience in England and bore a stronger relation to pre-1992 universities.

In terms of preparation for review, several authors have identified a beneficial impact. Research in England (McDowell et al, 1997; Henkel, 2000) has indicated that preparation, particularly in relation to self-assessment, had a stimulus that went further than the external review itself. This wider value of preparation for external assessment has also been evidenced in research regarding SHEFC TQA (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998). Further, the link between preparation and departmental teambuilding has been noted by research in both Scotland (Drennan, 2000) and England (Henkel, 1997, 2000).

Other benefits in relation to HEFCE TQA included in some cases greater awareness of the importance of the student experience and new levels of understanding and mutual interest within departments (Henkel, 2000). Further, research in Scotland (Drennan, 2000), in England (McDowell et al, 1997), and comments from expert practitioners (Clark P, 1997) indicate that preparation was a valuable source of staff development, with peer reviewers being the greatest beneficiaries. Indeed, McDowell et al asserted that HEFCE TQA reviewers benefited from viewing the practices of others and that their experiences frequently led to changes to assurance and enhancement systems and documentation.

Moreover, a widely noted positive impact was the increased focus given to learning and teaching. This is evidenced in research on external quality assessment in

Scotland (Sharp et al, 1997; Drennan, 2000; Henkel, 2000) and Europe (Brennan 1999). In relation to England McDowell et al (1997) found that external assessment underlined the importance of learning and teaching issues and encouraged increased commitment.

Whilst it is evident that external quality assessment had the above impacts, what has not been established is whether there has been a lasting influence and, if so, whether such an influence was found across an entire university sector. In terms of the cultural impact of external assessment, Brennan and Shah (2000a) assert that influencing factors can be the experience of self-evaluation and effects of internal institutional quality assurance approaches. Further, Gordon (2002a) considers that review visits and peer reviewer participation have brought gains in the form of a constructive professional dialogue.

However, there is no substantial evidence of a broader, lasting influence on a wide scale. This may be because quality assurance related cultural change could be a slow process. Indeed, some have speculated that it may take the socialisation of a new generation of academics to fully embed such a cultural change at departmental level (Brennan and Shah, 2000a). However, it is also speculated that indirect impacts such as cultural change are more fundamental and long lasting than direct impacts that perhaps followed report recommendations (Brennan and Shah, 2000a).

Of the previous research focused on Scotland, although Drennan's (2000) study focused on direct impacts and did not cover the entire 1992-2002 quality assessment period (it is noted that the TQA period was covered in full), by undertaking field research at an institutional level in each of the thirteen Scottish universities Drennan has provided a qualitative picture of the sector that other studies have not afforded. This sector-wide picture of Scotland is supplemented by the Sharp et al (1997) finding that views on the content and appropriateness of SHEFC TQA from across the sector were not split along pre-1992 and post-1992 university lines.

Building on the above, if the current study is to make an assessment of the longer term influence of external quality assessment in Scottish universities, it follows that it should also consider whether this has occurred across the sector.

Although there is evidence of short-term, direct impacts, there have also been negative findings and evidence of resistance to policies and processes. For example, in finding that external quality assurance brought an improved attitude to teaching, Brennan and Shah (2000a) also uncovered departmental resistance to institutional initiatives on such matters, which was linked to conflict with traditional departmental autonomy. Further, Morley (2003) has concluded that “*cultural change in the academy has been achieved, not by revolution, consultation or dialogue, but by time-hungry bureaucratic and administrative means*” (p.164).

These relatively minimal insights into the lasting impacts of quality assurance are drawn from Brennan and Shah’s (2000a) pooling of European case study assessments of the much more general topic of managing quality and Morley’s analysis of a very small sample, given that her study related to a multi-level experience of UK quality assessment; a point acknowledged by Morley as potentially limiting the generalisability of the research. These studies provide some background insight for the current research and, when considered in conjunction with work more closely associated to the current study, they also serve to underline that research into the lasting influence of external quality assessment in Scotland has not been undertaken.

Although various studies have found a mix of beneficial and detrimental aspects and experiences, perhaps the strongest attack on quality assessment comes from Morley (2003). Morley’s interviews uncovered “*corrosive and contradictory experiences and discomforts of being subjected to quality regimes*” (p.x). In terms of SHEFC TQA, institutions have questioned the need for more externality (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998) and survey respondents have declared various preferences, each of which sought to reduce the level of externality (Sharp et al, 1997). Further, research regarding both the Scottish (Sharp et al, 1997) and English experiences

(Henkel, 2000) has found that negative elements of the processes were stronger than the positive aspects.

Indeed, Bauer and Henkel's (1999) study indicated that the burden associated with the processes was the key detriment and that there was a perceived opportunity cost linked to this, a view supported by commentary on external assessment from Grant and Dickinson (2002). In terms of HEFCE TQA, McDowell et al (1997) highlighted that in some instances poor results could be detrimental to morale and positive results could inhibit departmental change.

The consistency of judgements, a critical point, is also addressed by the literature. In terms of SHEFC TQA, Sharp et al (1997) found that there was low confidence that different review teams would come to the same judgement. Linking with this, Drennan (2000) found that there was a failure of some peer reviewers to be mission sensitive in their considerations and subsequent judgements. Concerns such as these perhaps shed light on Clark's (Clark P, 1997) commentary on concerns over consistency. Clark was of the opinion that peer review would always be subjective and that the best aim would be that the process was carried out consistently.

Just as negative experiences of quality assessment could impede or conflict with more positive aspects, the broader literature, as well as that focused on quality assessment, indicates that other issues may also prove obstructive. In terms of the relationship between research and teaching, there is a strong body of opinion that research has primacy (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Jenkins, 1995) and Brennan and Shah (2000a) consider that the prevailing spotlight on research can be detrimental to the focus on learning and teaching. Perhaps this is partly because research rewards encourage research primacy (Jenkins, 1995) and research performance heavily informs promotion judgements (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Drennan, 2000).

In relation to this latter point, staff perceive that research performance is the route to promotion (Court, 1998) and there is a widely held view that it is difficult to evaluate teaching contributions (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Drennan, 2000). Moreover,

Henkel (2000) considers that although institutions have a genuine interest in teaching, they understandably follow the considerable incentives tied to research performance.

Whilst Drennan (2000) found that TQA acted as a limited counterweight to the pressures of RAE performance, there remains the view that the RAE undermines the ability of external accountability to raise the status of learning and teaching activities against research (Henkel, 2000). Trow (1996b) perhaps best highlights the focus and status attached to research activity: *“On the research side, of course, we know how cleverly academic departments manage their reports to the HEFC: the care with which they sort out the sheep from the goats on their staffs (with what effect on the morale of the goats?)”* (p. 313). Indeed, whilst there is some evidence that TQA may have increased the focus on learning and teaching, Shattock (1999) considers that although *“the strains imposed by the RAE provided the essential rationale for a TQA which could re-balance priorities between research and teaching”* (p.279), in effect it became an additional process that served to increase the tension found in regulating the previously self-regulated.

As noted earlier, the quality assessment of learning and teaching provision was not the only higher education public policy development that universities were asked to deal with. With this broader picture in mind, Clark (1997), as noted in Chapter Two, has commented that subject-level assessment was introduced into a hostile environment which did not bode well for its reception, support, and success. Linking with this, SHEFC TQA research has indicated that it was difficult for a process to balance developmental and accountability aims (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998) and to sufficiently encourage enhancement (Drennan, 2000).

Looking in more detail at the environment in which external quality assessment was expected to operate effectively, it is evident that the external nature of the policy and process clashed with the traditional autonomy enjoyed by institutions, and within them, departments and academics. In relation to SHEFC TQA, contextual documentation discussed in Chapter Two and literature discussed later in the current

chapter, together with the research results of Sharp et al (1997), indicate that SHEFC TQA was viewed as being externally imposed.

Commentator views and focused research (Drennan, 2000; Sharp et al, 1997) have indicated that processes need to be viewed as credible and owned or they may be perceived as being core to an accountability agenda that places compliance over development. Indeed, Drennan (2000) considered that TQA encouraged compliance and that enhancement would have been best aided by empowerment and encouragement.

The possibility of institutions, departments, and academic staff complying, in a hollow sense, with the process is a recognised danger given the importance of performance (Morley, 2002). It is clearly evident that the potential exists for departments to comply in a manner that will produce little benefit, as found by Henkel (2000) where 'compartmentalisation' saw departments treating the process as being primarily administrative rather than academic.

However, again the picture is relatively unclear, for Brennan and Shah (2000a) in their broader European study found that although there was resistance to external quality assurance processes, the increased focus on learning and teaching was appreciated by many. Indeed, the opportunity for a beneficial influence is underlined by the HEFCE TQA findings that a genuine interest in teaching was evidenced within institutions (McDowell et al, 1997). The difficulty appears that there are obstacles in the form of principled and reasoned objections to the policy and the operation of the process. Resulting academic responses could create tension not only between the state and the sector but also within institutions. For example, although their study found no such link, Brennan and Shah (2000a) recognised the possibility that institutional approaches could be perceived as representing external rather than internal values. Further, the discharge of external accountability could be seen as a task for the centre of the university (Henkel, 2000), effectively another form of compartmentalisation.

Bringing research on the Scottish and English experiences together, it appears that the difficult task for external quality assessment was and is to “*maintain the rigorous assurance of quality whilst maximising the potential for quality enhancement*” (McDowell et al 1997, p.10). An appropriate balance must be achieved whilst recognising that inherent tensions will remain (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998).

The above review of the literature on external quality assessment in universities clearly indicates that whilst the current research can draw upon the work of others, it is evident that there is considerable scope for additional, distinct research to be undertaken. Whilst the SHEFC TQA related research of Drennan (2000), Sharp (1997) and Evaluation Associates Ltd (1998) employed a more mechanistic approach to determining the success of TQA and its constituent elements, there is scope to embrace wider and perhaps less traditionally tangible aspects in focusing on the longer term influence of the external quality assessment of learning and teaching provision. For example, the very existence of an external process may be just as important a factor as the detail of the process.

Further, whilst broader literature offers some additional insight to that provided by SHEFC TQA related research, their focus is not on the experience in Scotland. Accordingly, there is scope for distinct, Scotland-focused research to be undertaken. Indeed, there is also scope for the current study to consider the entire period of subject level review, i.e. 1992-2002, and to focus solely on subject level external quality assessment in Scotland, a combination not previously tackled.

3.3 Definition of Propositions

The above discussion identifies numerous points drawn from previous research relating to external quality assessment and provides the basis and justification for the propositions that drive the current study.

In terms of this study, the information available from previous research provides only a partial picture of the influence of external quality assessment. This is primarily because the contributory pieces of research each had a different focus. Thus some

studies touched only on issues of relevance to the current research whilst others addressed core elements but then pursued the information gained along a different line of inquiry.

Indeed, in bringing converging and diverging elements of previous research together to aid the formulation of the propositions core to this study, it is underlined that there is scope for the current, distinct, research to be undertaken. This is particularly true given that the current study focuses solely on the Scottish experience and addresses the complete quality assessment cycle from 1992-2002.

Several themes identified in the discussion in section 3.2 aid the definition of Proposition One. The link between reputation and the importance attached to performance, together with the accompanying competitive edge that was also evidenced, are indicators of the increased focus of institutions and departments on suitably addressing such external assessments. In addition to this, evidence that preparation for review also had a degree of influence on learning and teaching activities indicates that external assessment had a broader impact.

Whilst there are assertions that the impact of external quality assessment was relatively shallow or short-term, there is also some evidence and speculation that a long-term, deeper, cultural impact may have occurred. Proposition One below, is based on aspects drawn from previous research but seeks to investigate further whether the focus brought by external quality assessment went beyond assessment performance and actually acted as a catalyst for the enhancement of the institutional and departmental focus on the quality of learning and teaching.

1. The implementation and operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities has had a positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

Proposition Two is a natural progression from Proposition One. Similarly, it builds upon aspects highlighted in the detailed discussion set out in section 3.2. If the current research is to make an assessment of the long-term catalytic influence of external quality assessment in Scotland, it is a reasonable next step to consider whether the influence has occurred across the sector.

Section 3.2 highlighted that studies in Scotland did not evidence a divergence between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities with regard to their views on specific aspects of external quality assessment. However, studies in England found a disparity in the degree of institutional focus, and in the pressure upon institutions to perform well, regarding pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. It is therefore appropriate to consider whether the impact of external quality assessment has occurred across the sector. This is particularly relevant given that Proposition One, in its suggestion of a long-term catalytic transition, builds on evidence of the importance of performance, an aspect identified above as perhaps being inconsistently felt.

An additional dimension to the second proposition is drawn from the historical development of the sector, as discussed earlier in the thesis. Chapter Two highlighted that pre-1992 and post-1992 universities had distinct cultural backgrounds and that the institutions within these sub-sectors were not homogenous. In line with the above rationale, Proposition Two is set out as follows:

2. The positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, has occurred across the Scottish university sector, even though institutions are culturally distinct.

As with the preceding propositions, Proposition Three is drawn from the discussion set out in section 3.2. If Proposition One is to build upon initial evidence of the influence of external assessment it follows that the study must also explore previously noted negative perspectives and also consider the influence of the

apparent imbalance in focus between the primary university activities of research and teaching. Of course, this should be considered in the context of the current study's focus on the long-term catalytic influence of external quality assessment, bearing in mind that the perspectives previously evidenced related to research with a different focus.

A second aspect of Proposition Three looks beyond the potential obstacle of negative perspectives. In doing so it considers the relevance and importance of opinions that attest to the need for the core academic community to have ownership of quality assurance. This is particularly relevant given the likelihood, highlighted in Chapter Two, that externality will remain an integral part of the higher education landscape. Proposition Three reads as follows:

3. The benefits to be gained from SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of the processes. Such negative perspectives and the substantial focus on research performance could erode the benefits gained. For the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching to continue to be positively influenced by external processes on a long-term basis, future approaches must instil ownership of quality assurance with subject level academics while retaining a level of institutional assessment sufficient to satisfy the existing external accountability obligation.

Essentially, the current research will consider whether the implementation and operation of external quality assessment has, across the Scottish university sector, had a catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, and if so, identify the breadth of such an influence and obstacles to, and options for, a continued beneficial interface.

Although this research is focused on the catalytic influence of external quality assessment, the Chapter Two discussion of the higher education public policy

developments clearly indicates that the interface between external quality assessment and institutions, and their constituent departments, did not exist in a vacuum and should be considered within the context of higher education public policy and managerialism.

To gain a fuller understanding as to how these wider issues may have influenced the opportunity for external quality assessment to have a long-term positive influence, it is important to build on the contextual background already provided by considering literature regarding culture and managerialism in the university sector. Such a consideration will underline the relevance of the propositions and the complexity of the context in which they are framed. This will also aid the wider interpretation of the research results and the subsequent drawing of implications for higher education, the public sector, and beyond. Regarding this latter point, Section 3.6 will draw upon broader organisational literature to clarify the connection between the experiences explored by the current research and those found in the wider public and private sectors.

3.4 Levels of Analysis

Prior to exploring the broader contextual literature, having defined the research question and propositions, it is necessary to consider the levels of analysis that will be addressed, as these will be integral to the research design set out in Chapter Five. In their analysis of the structure of higher education in the UK, Becher and Kogan (1992) set out four levels: the individual, the basic unit (department), the institution (university), and the central authority (e.g. SHEFC). In order to address the issues contained within the propositions, the most appropriate levels of analysis to be addressed are at institutional and departmental levels. To assess the longer term influence of the 1992-2002 external quality assessment period, information should be gathered from individuals who not only had personal experience of external quality assessment and an informed understanding of the state-sector and institution-department interfaces but who could also provide a perception of the experience and long-term reactions of institutions and their constituent departments.

Moreover, appropriately selected institutional informants would be able to provide an institutional perception that would take into account departmental behaviour. Also, appropriately selected departmental interviewees, in this case Heads of Departments, could provide a departmental perspective that would take into account institutional behaviour. Both levels would inform each other and would provide not only insight into reactions to external quality assessment but also valuable contextual background regarding state-sector and institution-department interfaces.

Essentially, the propositions seek to ascertain behaviour and perceptions of behaviour at aggregate higher levels regarding external – whether to the institution or the department – environmental factors embodied in the policy of external accountability and resultant quality assessment processes.

Additionally, appropriately selected participants in both categories would have a breadth and depth of experience that would allow a broader sector perspective to be obtained. Indeed, to underline and supplement this, a further grouping of informants who had a detailed knowledge of external quality assessment across the sector would be included in the field research.

The research does not discount the relevance of perceptions of the micro level inhabited by ordinary academic staff. Indeed, it is acknowledged that perceptions and reactions at this level exist and may have a substantial impact on the influence of change processes, both within higher education and indeed in the broader public and private sectors. Moreover, in relation to external quality assessment in higher education, Morley's (2003) multi-level analysis amounts to the most substantial 'attack from below' on the process, highlighting themes of power, imposition and distortion. The importance of the micro level viewpoint is underlined in Deem's (2001) criticism – arguing that different lower levels in an organisation would not necessarily concur with the views of higher levels – of Clark's (1998) methodology for considering the success of entrepreneurial universities. Further, Johnson and Deem (2003) argue that whilst studies have focused on policy and state-university relations, individual actors have a key role in any change process and accordingly

“organisational, management, and individual responses to this complex of forces are all important and likely to be complicated, contentious and contradictory” (p.295).

It is, of course, a legitimate view that different levels may have different knowledge. Indeed, it is noted that departments, institutions, and the sector as a whole, all amount to more than the sum of their parts, and that individuals are vital constituent parts in all of these (Becker and Kogan, 1992). However, whilst the existence of micro level views is acknowledged and in no way discounted, as stated, the current research, in line with its propositions, focuses on higher level behaviour and perceptions of behaviour in response to external environmental factors embodied in the policy of external accountability and processes of quality assessment.

Additionally, there are two other core justifications for not conducting field research at the micro level. Firstly, and fundamentally, the methodology adopted places emphasis on obtaining data of a high and consistent quality and this was not felt to be possible at the micro level. The quality of data obtained took primacy over attempting to hear every possible voice.

Chapter Five will clarify how purposeful sampling identified participants who had the knowledge base required to inform the research and allowed selection to remain within the control of the researcher. Just as selecting additional participants at institutional and Head of Department level who did not have the required knowledge base would weaken the overall quality of the data obtained, probability sampling at the micro level could have the same effect. Indeed, as noted earlier, although Morley's (2003) study canvassed views from a number of levels, the sample size was very small in relation to the UK-wide, multi-level scope of the research.

Similarly, relying on others, for example institution level participants, to select micro level participants would weaken the independence of the research. Given that a single person would not undertake this task, in all likelihood it would also provide considerable variance in the knowledge base of micro level participants. Indeed the selection of the participants by the researcher was the first stage in a vital process of

gaining the confidence, openness, and honesty of participants. Further, the introduction of varied micro level participants would mean that the individual contextual background against which the data was considered would vary and thus make it extremely difficult to make assessments of bias or of the integrity of the data.

Secondly, the Head of Department could provide an informed view of departmental actions and responses with regard to external quality assessment, given that this is a dual role of manager and *primus inter pares* academic. Heads of Departments were in a strong position to provide perceptions of changes to the focus on the quality of learning and teaching provision and to do so in the light of the internal and external contextual environments in which quality assessment operated, given their knowledge of policy, process and practice.

Indeed, this dual role means that the Head of Department has a core role in translating institutional objectives and internal pressures to the micro level, perhaps negotiating with individuals to bring them on-board with necessary preparations, and may also interact with institutional management, perhaps seeking appropriate central support or departmental discretion. This is supported by the view of Knight and Trowler (2001) that a core task for Heads of Departments is to balance conflicting priorities. Further, Chandler et al (2002) found that that Heads of Departments often responded to managerialism by "*embracing supportive and co-operative relationships in an attempt to insulate employees from some of the pressures emanating from beyond them*" (p.1061).

As a safeguard, should aspects of the research results be contradictory or inconsistent, the study will be able to draw upon the micro level work of Morley (2003) to provide perspective and to aid an assessment as to the validity of the chosen approach, as indeed it will with previous research undertaken at institutional and departmental levels of analysis.

3.5 Culture, Accountability and Managerialism

As noted earlier, although the research question and propositions focus on external quality assessment, building on the context set out in Chapter Two, a consideration of the literature regarding culture and managerialism in universities may provide a fuller understanding as to how these wider issues, and associated perceptions of state-sector and institution-department managerialism, may have influenced the opportunity for external quality assessment to have a long-term positive influence. Further, this insight into the sector and institutional environment in which external quality assessment operated will also provide a university-specific backdrop against which section 3.6 will discuss the broader potential relevance of the research in relation to the private and public sectors.

3.5.1 University Cultures

Goodlad (1995) notes that often quoted descriptions of institutions are MacIntyre's view of the university as "*a place of constrained disagreement*" (p.19) and Kerr's (p.86) "*set of individual faculty entrepreneurs united only by a common grievance over parking*" (p.86). Of course more detailed views of the university exist but these broad statements are a valuable starting point because they highlight that universities are complex organisations populated by strong, independent people. Indeed, Goodlad underlines the importance of the relationship between individuals and their institutions, asserting that "*a view about individuals...must precede a judgement about institutions, because institutions are social arrangements*" (p.15).

In addition to the internal relationship are external elements linking institutions and academics to the wider university sector. Trowler (1998) highlights the link between academics and the institutional and sector culture in his assumption of an interlocking British higher education system where "*the nature of the linkage is both cultural and structural*" (p.17), with common language, issues, and stakeholders.

The complexity of the university culture is indicated by Trowler's dismissal of one dimensional corporate level models, arguing that such a view "*misses all of the other recurrent practices, values and attitudes which go on in any social institution and*

which, from an individual's perspective, help constitute personal identity" (p.29). The detailed nature of university cultures, and the relationships interwoven with this, is a key point for this thesis because the study must consider the attitudes and reactions to TQA and Subject Review at both institutional and departmental levels in order to consider the influences of these processes.

The importance of considering both institutional and departmental attitudes is highlighted by Trowler's view that the multi-dimensional nature of universities is one where "*cultural characteristics may be configured in ways which will impede or facilitate change*" (p.30). Indeed, Brennan and Shah (2000a) support the view that culture plays a pivotal role regarding change and Johnson (2002) underlines the power of "*social, structural and value-dependent hurdles*" (p.104).

A consideration of the cultural characteristics of universities highlights two key perspectives that dominate the literature. One represents the hierarchical/managerial perspective and is synonymous with management and structure. The other is the collegial perspective and is synonymous with academic freedom and community. Although more detailed models of university cultures have been identified (e.g. McNay, 1995; Bergquist, 1992; Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996), the core hierarchy/managerial and collegium definitions serve as the basis for these.

These definitions can apply to both the relationships within an individual institution and between institutions and Government or agencies. Hierarchy "*assumes that the individuals in designated roles possess authority to affect the behaviour of others*" (Becher and Kogan, 1992, p.72). Whereas collegium assumes that academic staff "*have equal authority to participate in decisions which are binding on each of them. It usually implies that individuals have discretion to perform their main operations in their own way, subject only to minimal collegial controls*" (p.67).

The interwoven nature of cultures is highlighted by Becher and Kogan (1992) who, noting that pure models rarely exist in real life, consider institutional culture as being defined by a dual structure of hierarchical executive roles and collegial committees,

with each incorporating elements of the other. The complexity of the cultural make-up is increased by the assertion that the dual aspects of hierarchy and collegium are incorporated not only in the institutional structure but also in individual institutional roles. For example, the Head of Department *"...operates both hierarchically, in as much as he possesses the power to direct and to affect the prospects of individual teachers, and collegially, in as much as he has to reach agreement with his colleagues on many of the major academic and allocative decisions"* (p.74).

Further, Becher and Kogan highlight that this duality and interaction is also evident in a broad context whereby institutions have to balance the maintenance of institutional values with the development of the institution in the face of changing needs and environments.

The interwoven relationship between hierarchy and collegium, occurring at numerous levels, indicates the potential for tensions to occur when perceived managerialist government policies of accountability create a situation where institutions must satisfy managerial requirements from within an ostensibly collegial culture.

The complexity of university cultures is underlined by Bergquist (1992). Indeed, this analysis sheds helpful light on the position faced by institutions during this turbulent period, for they may simultaneously operate with multiple cultures in an effort to discuss, negotiate, and translate issues with staff, departments, other institutions, and external agencies. Moreover, collegiality may combine with management, contradicting the absolute polarity of these cultures implied by institutional and sector managerialist conflicts (Bergquist, 1992). Further, not only are university cultures complex but, as highlighted by Thorne and Cuthbert (1996), different institutions have different cultural balances. Such views provide support for the premise in the second research proposition that universities in the Scottish sector are culturally distinct.

The above indicates that in considering the influence of TQA and Subject Review the research should consider the internal relationship between an institution and its departments as well as the relationship between universities, the university sector, and Government/agencies. Also, the discussion of the complexity of university cultures indicates that the research should consider whether the influence of TQA and Subject Review would significantly differ between universities with different cultures.

3.5.2 The Collegial Culture

In discussing the key cultural themes, it is evident that, though similar, universities are culturally distinct. In order to illustrate state-sector and institution-department managerialism tensions, the current section provides background on the traditionally prevailing university culture of collegiality.

As noted in Chapter Two, a significant expansion in the number of universities occurred post-1992, effectively meaning that specific institutions formerly from a different part of the education sector shared the same status as traditional universities. Whilst the thesis is sensitive to the cultural differences in institutions across the enlarged post-1992 university sector, with the former public sector more used to a strong managerial guide, a discussion of collegium remains the most appropriate for the tension is not one of management but rather of managerialism gaining primacy over professionalism. Deem (1998) highlights that professionalism exists across the enlarged UK university sector: *“The former polytechnics and colleges of higher education emerged from a rather more bureaucratic and hence more hierarchical and rule-bound local authority tradition than their more collegiate competitors. Nevertheless, in the 1980s and before, the polytechnics had a range of employment conditions and practices which afforded academic staff at least some professional autonomy, trust and discretion”* (p.49).

Although universities vary in their cultural make-up, collegium is widely identified as traditionally being the prevailing culture (e.g. Kogan and Hanney, 2000; Deem (1998). Collegium embodies a number of features. Harvey and Knight (1996)

highlight shared decision making and the mutual support of academic integrity, whilst McNay (1995) notes "*classic collegial academy*" as being defined by "*significant academic autonomy, or professional self-determination*" (p.105).

Middlehurst (1995) brings the two aspects together in her definition of the academic community as being "*...a group of people...working together to their mutual advantage in a democratic and cohesive self-governing enterprise*" where "*collaboration combined with independence is valued highly*" (p.81). Meanwhile the Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) description of collegium being "*loosely coupled organised anarchies which empowered the academic entrepreneur*" (p.181) emphasises autonomy having primacy over formal structure.

Alongside this ostensibly positive perception of an empowered, democratic community, negative attributes must also be considered. For example, Goodlad (1995) considers that collegialism can be a form of higher education heresy if submersion in the culture leads to academic staff showing an "*...inability to see themselves in any dimension or in any role in society except that associated with their collegial role*" (p.85). Coupled with characteristics of "*loose definition of policy for the organization as a whole and loose control over activity or the implementation of any policy*" (McNay's, 1995, p.105), collegium could be argued as being a worthy but ineffectual culture in times when firm policy definition and implementation are required.

The interface between the collegial culture and managerial processes is an essential consideration if an assessment of the influence of TQA and Subject Review is to be made. Indeed, Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) highlight the tension that may come from such an interface. They state that within the collegial institution "*authority resides with the individual, or with the internal group, in a pecking order which may be relatively stable*" (p.188) and that this shared commitment is protected by "*insulation from external environment pressure*" (p.188). However, they note that such insulation can be affected by increasing external pressures in terms of resources

and accountability and that this is a prime reason for the gradual breakdown of the collegial structure.

The above discussion of the collegial culture, and its relationship to the external world, is valuable to the investigation of the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. It could be argued that the academic community aspect of collegium could indicate the likelihood of taking the opportunity to enhance individual and collective approaches to the quality of learning and teaching provision. However, it could also be argued that the desire for shared-decision making by the community and freedom from perceived unwarranted outside influences may create hostility to what could be seen as externally imposed processes operating within the collegial environment, especially if the process used is not felt to be relevant. In order to gain a greater understanding of the potential difficulties in the collegial-managerial interface, it is necessary to further consider the impact of external and internal management pressures on the traditional culture of universities.

3.5.3 Increased Accountability and Managerialism

Drawing upon the discussion in Chapter Two, there are two core reasons why it is appropriate to consider the influence that the Government's wider managerialist policy stance had on university cultures. Firstly, the success of TQA and Subject Review could be dependent on the level of acceptance they achieved from institutions and departments, which may have strong collegial cultures. Secondly, these processes could be considered to be not only elements of a managerialist state-sector relationship but also agents fostering institution-department managerialism.

For example, regarding the state-sector tension, Clark (1997), with experience as both Director of Quality Assessment at HEFCE and Director of Teaching and Learning at SHEFC, states that *"The Government's decision to charge the newly created funding councils with the responsibility to introduce subject-based QA injected increased tension into the relations between the universities and the funding council, at a time when the financial screws were being further tightened every year"* (p.219).

Regarding the managerialist tension within the sector, the role of the CVCP (now known as Universities UK) is an interesting illustration. Whilst the CVCP, like its member institutions, might have to *“help channel the pressures”* (Tapper and Salter, 1997, p.119) from Government by encouraging the necessary adoption of improved practices and thus reduce overt scrutiny, such an approach has led to claims that it is acting as *“a conduit for the transmission of government demands”* (p.119). Although Tapper and Salter see the issue as being much more complex, they acknowledge that the CVCP strategy could be seen as *“dancing continuously to the government’s tune”* (p.119) and note that *“Vice-Chancellors may speak for their universities, and the CVCP may represent the university system, but this is not to deny that many of the troops have become little more than demoralised spectators”* (p.120). Similar comments on the CVCP strategy of pre-empting government initiatives have been widely stated (e.g. Henkel, 2000).

Although perceptions of managerialism abound with complexities, as highlighted in Chapter Two, it is evident that the Government’s higher education policies have had an increasingly dramatic influence on the university sector since the early 1980s. Again as indicted in Chapter Two, the concept of criteria and operational power (Winstanley et al, 1995) can helpfully be applied to the accountability discussion and debates found in the Scottish and UK university sectors. It is evident that Government and its agencies were in conflict with the university sector on two levels: with the policy of accountability determining criteria and the adopted quality assessment processes dictating the operations that satisfied such demands.

The conflicts inherent in increasing the level of accountability are set out by Trow (1996b). Whilst accountability can be a constraint on arbitrary power, and corruption therein, and has been claimed to sustain or raise quality through scrutiny, it can also be a regulatory device, defining the reports it requires. The relationship between accountability and the criteria and operational power concepts become clear through Trow’s elaboration on accountability: *“While in principal accountability operates through reports on past actions, the anticipation of having to be accountable throws its shadow forward over future action. It thus is a force for*

external influence on institutional behavior, an influence which can vary from a broad steer, leaving to the institution a measure of autonomy over the implementation of policy, to the direct commands of an external regulatory agency which uses accountability to ensure compliance with specific policies and directives, and designs its system of reports to ensure that conformity” (p.311).

Linking with the above, Neave (2001) argues that the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a university “*is a prior condition to the degree of answerability it must show to external interests and the government not least...*” (p.1) and is of the opinion that higher education public policy developments have restated “*institutional autonomy as a series of operational conditions and functions over and above its historically prime quality as an ethical and philosophical axiom*” (p.2).

Essentially, it appears that because “*institutional autonomy and public accountability are inalienable principles*” (Neave, 2001, p.2), strengthening one has the effect of weakening the other, creating a situation whereby trust and professionalism are challenged in that “*obligations to report are usually disguised obligations to conform to external expectations*” (Trow, 1996b). These views add support to the view in Chapter Two that the accountability policy debate overshadowed quality assessment process discussions. Indeed, in terms of HEFCE TQA, Newby (1999) considers that debate during the TQA period was more about policy than process.

It is evident that although the current research has external quality assessment as its focus, in order to evaluate the influence and to tie it to broader issues in terms of higher education policy, and indeed public and private sector scenarios, the managerialism context in which the research sits must be considered. Indeed, Morley (2003) considers that the quality discourse highlights the changing relationship between universities and the state. Although increased Governmental involvement could indicate that the state is taking responsibility for the quality of provision, Morley considers it to be an intensely political manoeuvre and effectively “*an installation of power*” (p.vii). Indeed, Morley is of the opinion that although external subject level assessment has formally ended, the emerging

institution level methods of accountability continue *“the ethos of beratement and surveillance... in a new structural guise”* (p.160).

As is evident in Chapter Two, the possible impacts of external accountability policies and external quality assessment processes were not lost on the university sector and its institutions. However, as highlighted earlier, negotiations in relation to this *“hostile external environment”* (Deem, 2004, p.124) were carefully approached. It is apparent that although the policies fundamentally challenged institutional and individual autonomy and professionalism, there remained a danger that *“resistance to change is perceived as an incapacity for readjustment and redeployment in a rapidly changing social environment”* (Morley, 2003, p.ix).

Perhaps a key difficulty for the academic community in resisting these public policies was, as noted in Chapter Two, that there were few sympathisers when Thatcher’s public sector reforms finally knocked on the door of higher education. There was a perception by some that the culture of institutions was *“designed to benefit the ‘producer’s’ interests as much as those of the ‘consumer’”* (Newby, 1999, p.268) and that resistance to change was borne from the difficulty in *“persuading people to relinquish self interest”* (p.268). Thus, although academics may have considered the policy and process debates to be about power, Morley (2003) considers that their resistance could be perceived by some as anti-quality, even though they were actually fighting for their *“professional and organizational survival”* (p164).

Essentially, Government may argue that accountability is about assurance and the university sector may see it as being about negating autonomy and professionalism. Although conservatism amongst higher education professionals can resist changes that threaten their professionalism and the work that it has achieved, it appears that this is based on more than self-interest (Becher and Kogan, 1992). In terms of power, autonomy, professionalism and quality, Williams’ (1997) views add insight: *“In the traditional provision of elite higher education in Britain professional integrity was the paramount guarantor of quality. Universities appointed the most*

able people they could find and, after a long apprenticeship, they were given almost complete autonomy in their teaching and research. Reputation was the currency of this system. It was hard won and easily lost...Universities were more concerned to ensure their long-term reputation rather than their short-term income” (p.287).

With higher education policy developments seen by some as an attack both on institutional autonomy and individual professionalism, it follows that the institution-department managerialism, whereby the demands of state upon institutions are replicated as demands by the centre of the institution upon departments, is also an important contextual factor when considering the influence of external quality assessment. In short, a situation could develop whereby there are “*managerial objectives which may or may not be subscribed to by the academic community but which have to be met if the institution itself is to be successful*” (Shattock, 1999, p.279).

Dopson and McNay (1996) use a similar matrix to that of criteria and operational power but rather than displaying sector stakeholder strength it illustrates the culture of individual institutions in terms of internal powers of policy definition and control of implementation. It could be argued that this highlights that the criteria and operational conflict on a sector level is mirrored within institutions, with departmental and central university power influenced by the prevailing cultural balances within that particular university. Thus, the issue of institution-department managerialism is as complex as that of the state-sector relationship and is similarly closely tied to prevailing cultures.

As noted in Chapter Two, the dialogue and discussion regarding external accountability and quality assessment was highly political with both sides carefully choosing their moves in an on-going debate. Within this, the sector and its institutions balanced negative views of policy and process with the danger of ending up in a worse position than they were already in. The sector did not want an inspectorate and did not want to give the Government justification for following such a route. Indeed, even at the end of TQA there remained a fear in the UK university

sector that an inspectorate approach could be adopted. This point is highlighted by Deem's (2001) comment that the QAA was promoted to Vice Chancellors "*on the basis that the alternative is to hand control over to the Office for Standards in Education, which inspects schools and colleges...*" (11).

Whilst the universities continued to carefully tackle issues regarding challenges to their traditionally strong criteria and operational power, there remained a degree of caution in negotiations that indicated such wider fears. It is evident that there was certainly an element of 'better the devil you know', and that this applied not only at the level of policy debate but also in institutional approaches to actually performing well in what it seems were perceived as hostile external assessments. In short, although universities may not have wished to participate in external quality assessments, they strove for strong results. It could be argued that there was a desire to underline the quality of provision both within individual institutions and also across the sector, thus challenging the need for such external processes. Further, if a department was going to be assessed, it naturally would want to achieve as strong a result as possible. The complex often political choices faced by the sector are perhaps best summed-up by Watson (2000a), who highlighted that when "*operating in this quasi-political environment, it is also important to ensure that messages sent do not rebound: either by being wilfully misunderstood or having a bluff called*" (p.30).

Such caution also applied to Government and its agencies, fearing the need to overtly impose processes. Thus, as evidenced in Chapter Two, the period was marked by carefully considered negotiations and trade-offs between these key stakeholders in terms of both policy and process, and thus criteria and operational power. On a broader scale this is evidenced by the twelve-year evolution in Scotland from TQA via Subject Review to ELIR. The delicacy of negotiations and the importance of perceptions is illustrated in that whilst it could be argued that the university sector had won the war in terms of moving from a dual audit-assessment approach to one of audit only, it could be contended that the Government found subject level assessment expensive, controversial, and perhaps redundant given that it had succeeded in internalising greater managerialist approaches within individual institutions.

Indeed, from a macro perspective it could be speculated that the undoubtedly sincere development of the ELIR approach was aided by a desire of all parties concerned to underline the effectiveness and togetherness of the university sector working in partnership with SHEFC and the QAA Scottish Office. Although the days of the UGC “*as a symptom and instrument of a trust relationship*” (Trow, 1996b, p.313) were gone, the QAA Scottish Office and SHEFC nonetheless represented buffers from the QAA and the Scottish Executive respectively.

3.5.4 Management and Managerialism

Returning to the interaction between an institution and its departments, as highlighted earlier in this chapter the cultural make-up of institutions is interwoven with collegial and hierarchical elements. Further, the hierarchical focus on stability and control has been described as “*the home of managerialism*” (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996, p.188). It is evident from Chapter Two that from the late 1980s onwards the hierarchical element, in the form of managerialism, gained increasing stature, initially in terms of the state-sector relationship but then onwards to the institution-department interface. It is widely considered (e.g. Tapper and Slater, 1997; Kogan and Hanney, 2000) that the 1985 Jarratt Report and subsequent legislative changes brought an increased pressure on universities to adopt a more managerial approach.

The value of considering the collegium-managerialism interaction is that it provides an appropriate background to the consideration of the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. It aids the thesis in assessing whether the external nature of the processes, given the opposing forces of collegium and managerialism, affected how they were treated both at an institutional and departmental level. To further understand this, it is necessary to consider how institutions balanced the traditional culture of collegium with the emerging managerialist approach.

It is, of course, noted that the managerialist pressure of accountability on universities was not solely embodied in the quality assessment of learning and teaching. The requirement for the submission of institutional policy documents such as strategic

and financial plans, and the operation of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) also placed demands and pressure upon universities.

The University sector and individual universities were experiencing a greater amount of management interwoven with their traditional culture of collegiality. However, although management was very much to the fore, this does not mean that managerialism and management are one and the same. This is an important avenue of discussion for this study because the institutional and individual academic staff acceptance of external pressures as valid might influence whether the concept was viewed as being a management necessity or a managerialist imposition. This might in turn influence the opportunity that external processes, such as SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review, could be given to have a beneficial impact.

Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) state that Trow saw managerialism as being an ideology that aimed to “*elevate the activity of managing above that which is managed*” rather than the traditional management of “*concern for the effectiveness of an organization*” (173). However, a common misconception sometimes occurs when sincere management actions are taken to deal with bona fide dilemmas, leading to university measures being derided as managerialist activities (Cuthbert, 1992).

Indeed, although Cuthbert considers that the policy and funding developments that began in the late 1980s made “*changes in management inevitable*” his opinion is that internal changes were made to ensure that the objectives and values of institutions could remain intact. It could be argued that the traditional collegial structure underpinned the institution but accepted the necessity of revised management practices, though not managerialism.

Further, it could be argued that although management and managerialism are different though overlapping concepts, the difficulty for academic staff in collegial institutions was recognising which concept was aiding them and which was challenging the ethos of the institution, and of these, which were borne out of necessity. The difficulty in attempting to achieve an appropriate level of

management in an ostensibly collegial culture is highlighted by Schuller (1995) in that although *“the notion of academic management has a serious and challenging sense to it”* (6), this did not necessarily mean a wholesale change in institutional culture.

In looking at management in higher education institutions, Barnett (1992) considers that there are many areas such as in finance and personnel, where individuals can *“legitimately ‘manage’ in the straight-forward sense of the term”* (p.70). However, he considers that even in non-academic matters such as these, managers must still be accountable to academics given that they are carrying out their work in the interests of the academic community and the institution. Barnett argues that *“managerial activities gain their legitimacy”* depending on how they serve academic aims and gain the support of the academic community (p.70). Accordingly, *“the management has to pay close attention to the employees, to secure the active understanding of and commitment to the organization”* (p.71).

This view puts collegium in charge of management, with management working for the collegial institution, and not, as in managerialism, directing it. However, Cuthbert (1992) believes that ‘management’ should not be merely dismissed as a *“useful tool or concept for HE”* for *“colleges need to be managed just as much as commercial enterprises – managed differently, no doubt, but managed nevertheless”* (p.154). Further, he considers that the poor perception of management is partly owed to a somewhat unfair association with the reduction in finances for universities and resulting drives for further efficiencies.

Defining management as *“the process of getting things done, usually through the agency of other people – colleagues and employees”*, Cuthbert considers that the issue is not whether to manage but rather *“how management is conceived and how well it is executed”* (p.153). Indeed, Cuthbert believes that management is required to respond to interrelated and irreversible changes in the legislative framework, levels of public financial support, and public attitudes towards higher education.

The move from management being a tool to being a driver, in effect constituting managerialism, is highlighted by Middlehurst's (1995) assertion that political and economic pressures have brought about a move from administration to management regarding everyday institutional operations resulting in a movement from coordination and implementation to directive control.

Whilst external pressure may have required the adoption of a more managerial approach, the cultural clash came when managerialism sought primacy: *"in light of the need for strategic planning and decisions on priorities, including elimination of certain activities, there was a planned drift to the development of the chief executive and senior management team concept"* (McNay, 1995, p.108). McNay saw this change as being legitimised by the Jarratt Report, the impact of which was discussed in Chapter Two. The danger as far as the collegial culture was concerned was that an unchecked managerial influence could evolve into a corporate culture where *"decisions were effectively taken outside the formal arenas which simply endorsed them"* (p.110). The justification for such a development was that it was more effective to make decisions this way. However, according to McNay, this meant that essentially a two-tier structure of power operated.

3.5.5 The Collegial-Managerial Balance

Another difficulty in attaining the appropriate managerial influence within a collegial structure is the complexity of the university organisation. Lockwood (1987) sees management as functioning through an organisational structure that combines the three frameworks of departments (often linked by faculties), committees, and officers. When all the basic units, support, and non-academic parts are brought together, even a small institution has quite a considerable infrastructure.

Within such an infrastructure, complexity abounds. For example, Becher and Kogan (1992) consider that the integral elements of the framework contain traits of both collegium and hierarchy, and that the relationship of basic units and individuals to institutions is *"complex and ambiguous"* (p.68). Added to this is the consideration that individual academics, like their institutions, are complex. Accordingly, the

university community “...is a complex matrix made up of personal, disciplinary and institutional loyalties which reach beyond the physical boundaries of the places where people work.” (Schuller, 1995, p.7).

The distinction between individuals and institutions is an important one, given that acceptance of an external policy or process by an institution may not necessarily be mirrored in its academic departments. The individualism and subsequent grouping of academics is evident in Becher’s (1989) characterisation of ‘academic tribes and territories’. Although there are distinct groupings there remains a broad commonality given that “tribes, after all, share the same ethnicity; the territories they occupy are part of the same land mass” (p.171).

Further, as noted by Becher and Kogan (1992), the discipline-based networks of academics that constitute ‘invisible colleges’ “are no less powerful for being informal in nature” (p.104). For Henkel (2002) such community interaction and shared values enable academics to “construct their identities” (p.138). These communities and identities are often stronger than institutional bonds, with universities, according to Clark (Clark B, 2001) now “multiversities, even conglomerate gatherings or holding companies” of disparate stand-alone faculties (p.18).

Middlehurst (1995) sees the challenge of handling the complexity of an institution as being one which makes management and leadership essential because “when choices are required, the vision and direction setting tasks associated with leadership and the decision-taking and implementation systems associated with management are both needed” (p.77). Further institutional leaders must cope with changes and decisions at many levels, internally and externally, even though it is “difficult to separate the two because internal and external contexts continuously impact upon each other” (p.78).

In addressing these internal and external pressures, Miller (1995) sees the tasks for management as being the satisfaction of the needs of key stakeholders and

accordingly ensuring the long-term future of the university. Essentially, *“Institutional management is the skin on the drum: there to provide the barrier and the flexibility to absorb the external pressure; protect the instrument and enable it to perform”* (p.91). However, Miller points out that as universities are subjected to greater accountability, their managers require greater amounts of, and more complex systems of, data collection and accounting. As a result the university management puts greater pressures of accountability onto staff.

Thus, in relation to the current research, it could be argued that increasingly universities are less able to protect their staff from external pressures. Further, this could create a tension between the institution and its staff regarding this apparent failure to fend off external pressure or the perception that the institution has become the agent of the external bodies or Government. With competing views and tensions across such a complex organisation, it is difficult for key roles to achieve a working balance. For example, Deem (1998) asserts that management duties may mean that the head of department role becomes one where *“control and regulation of academic labour seem to have replaced collegiality, trust and professional discretion”* (p.52).

Research by Deem et al (2000) has highlighted that the collegial-managerialist tension within universities, in terms of the interface between institutional management and academic departments, does exist. Further, they note that despite inclusive intentions, actions of the ‘cadre’ of senior management can be seen as contrary to the values of ordinary academic staff. Thus it is argued that there is a very real possibility that institutional acceptance of an externally initiated policy or process may conflict with feelings at the department level and that the opportunity for a beneficial influence may be weakened. Indeed, not only might such institutional acceptance not be mirrored at departmental level but the perception that an institution is acting in a managerialist fashion, as the agent of external powers rather than the protector of internal values, may be a further impediment.

In terms of institution-department managerialism, Henkel’s (2000) conclusion that an ‘academic manager’ identity was emerging among senior managers sheds light on

the possibility that university responses to external pressures could be construed as internal managerialism. Deem and Johnson (2000) have covered similar territory in their analysis of the emergence of manager-academics and have noted that such an identity was often resisted or regarded as secondary.

The complexity of perceptions of managerialism can perhaps be illustrated by the decision by Deem et al (2000) to use 'manager academic' terminology rather than that of 'academic manager', illustrating the perceived blurring of the lines between university managers that are senior academics and those that are senior administrators. Interestingly, Heads of Departments were seen by Deem and Johnson (2000) as being primarily academics, a point that further justifies the stance adopted by the current research that they could provide both a management and departmentally-centred academic contribution to this study.

A key difficulty for institutional leaders in terms of ensuring that the collegial culture is not seen as being usurped by the managerial element, is that different levels within the institution are aware of the existence and importance of external pressures. The crucial relationship for the individual academic, as pointed out by Miller (1995), "*remains with university as employer and manager*" (p.95). It could be argued that the problem is that institutions not only have to attain the correct collegial-managerial balance but must also strive to ensure that the perception among the multitude of units is that such a balance has been struck. An additional obstacle to this already difficult task could be that even if departments and the centre of the university were in agreement, consensus could be lost owing to time lags in implementation between the centre of the university and departments (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996).

It could be argued that if academic staff are going to accept or resist change in the form of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review, their perception of whether it is a valid collegial tool or an unnecessary managerialist intrusion may be influenced by their relationships within their own institution and whether they consider that their

university represents their attitudes in discussions with those exerting external pressure.

Further, it could be argued that the difficulty, for both Government implementing policies in the university sector and for institutions attempting to satisfy external obligations from within an ostensibly collegial culture, is highlighted by the language used in higher education whereby “...even the word ‘management’ itself was generally avoided in the university context until fairly recently...during the 1960s and 1970s...the rhetoric was primarily that of ‘quality’ and ‘academic freedom’ rather than that of ‘management’ and ‘efficiency’” (Miller, 1995 p.44, citing Harris 1991). Thus, it could also be argued that the academic perception is that management, or perhaps managerialism, is the opposite of academic freedom. On a sector-wide scale, this can lead to the Harvey and Knight (1996) view that the “*the British Government has used managerialism to impose a ‘command economy’ on higher education. It is not, therefore, surprising that academics are growing suspicious of quality and of the burgeoning quality industry*” (p.70).

However, it is unfair to assume that collegial hostility to managerial approaches are simply based on beliefs of the general nature and value of management or from the failure of an institution to adequately articulate to staff the necessity of satisfying external pressures. The opposition to increased accountability, particularly in professional organisations, can occur not only from a point of principle but also in relation to the processes adopted to satisfy this aim if they are considered to be inappropriate. For example, Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) argue that a lack of measurable outputs has led to a focus on performance indicators and the construction of league tables which “*can often be a measure of the management of the indicators rather than a measure of the value and impact of the process itself*” (p.174). Thus, it could be argued that disenchantment with the process could follow regardless of agreement over, or acceptance of, policy.

The changing relationship between the increasingly managerial institutions and their collegial community is highlighted by Morrell (1992) who sees the ethos of

collegiality being superseded by an outdated system of management that places centralised power in individuals through a hierarchical structure of power which is balanced by structural devolution. The intention is that the centralised power is devolved provided that the aims of the centre are carried out. In short, power is *“re-delegated on a conditional and accountable basis”* (p.18). Whilst highlighting the side-stepping of collegial consent, Morrell sees a negative element in that *“the central authority divides the resources and sets the targets and is therefore in a position to delegate the responsibility for the achievement of the targets without necessarily providing the means of their achievement”* (p.18).

Background to the negative perception of management is illustrated by Deem’s (1998) assertion that *“Until quite recently, the notion that the activities and cultures of universities either required managing or were, in any meaningful sense, ‘managed’, would have been regarded as heretical.”* (p.47). However, Watson (2000b) considers that the opinion that management is fundamentally detrimental to institutions is borne from a *“mythological view of institutional history”* (p.8). Watson highlights that such a view *“ignores a long line of baronial deans and heads of departments, as well as eccentric and ruthless heads of institutions”* (p.8) in its promotion of the belief that institutions *“operated effectively in the past and would operate effectively today on a basis of management by ‘eventual consensus’”* (p.8). In illustrating the absurdity of such a notion, he quotes Wragg’s (1997) quip that *“the prospect of a university Senate trying to decide what to do with a free kick on the edge of the penalty area is too awful to contemplate”* (p.9).

3.5.6 Leading and Managing Academics

It could be argued that a gap in attitudes and perceptions between staff and their institution could widen if policies are seen as threatening the ethos of the university and are dealt with by the university senior management in a manner that removes decision making from the academic body of the institution, leaving a sense of disempowerment. The danger is that academics become disenfranchised and according to Morrell (1992) *“they can easily become divorced from institutional purpose and goals and are liable to do so if antagonised”* (p.18).

To avoid this, Morrell, citing Handy (1983) asserts that *“academics have to be led, not managed, they have to be persuaded not ordered”* (p.18); a view echoed by Thorne and Cuthbert (1996). However, it could be argued that the achievement of consensus in a complex organisation and marrying this with the pursuit of internal goals and the satisfaction of external pressures may be unattainable. As indicated by Miller (1995), strong disagreements may occur about goals and methods of achieving them and *“differences of interest between different groups of academic staff emerge which cannot be resolved by rational discussion”* (p.99).

Tapper and Palfreyman (1998) consider that in response to changing situations universities should govern themselves differently to ensure that they satisfy the requirements of the new era. However, as highlighted by Miller (1995), *“universities...are not simply passive recipients of state orders or market forces; they have their own resources, models, cultures and agendas”* (p.91). Accordingly the task for institutions, as highlighted earlier, is to balance their obligations with their mission, and in doing so balance necessary managerial revision with their core collegial ethos. The requirement, thus, is for *“a concept of management for quality, rather than the management of quality”* (Barnett, 1992, p.95) that would acknowledge that *“...there is a responsibility on institutional managers to be sensitive to the special character of the institutions in which they work...”* (p.69).

In short, as highlighted by Trowler (1998), the successful adaptation of universities to changing contexts *“...revolves around the understanding of cultures within the university”* (p.150). It could be argued that individual academics need to recognise that their institutions must react appropriately to certain pressures from Government. However, institutional managers must in turn recognise the core culture of their institution. As Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) have highlighted, academics, as professionals, expect *“...a relationship based upon trust”* (p.183).

Regarding the external accountability of learning and teaching, it seems that the above expectation has been difficult to satisfy. It could be argued that the clash of the principles of accountability and autonomy may impede agreement over policy or

process. From a Government perspective, expansion in student numbers and financial constraint has necessitated accountability. Essentially, *"concern for quality is a natural consequence of scarcity of resources; the resource providers want to know about quality and whether they are getting value for money"* (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996, p.185). From an academic perspective, there is a belief that *"professionals know what they are doing and must be left to get on with both defining and achieving quality. Any other approach will weaken professionalism and damage quality"* (p.185). In short, *"this clash of values and concern over quality is reflected in the national debate over which form of quality assurance should pre-dominate"* (p.185).

Perhaps for institutions and Government to come together on quality assurance there must be a recognition that acceptance of policy depends upon a balance of *"...the extent to which it involves, and the extent to which it controls, the professionals – academics and others who believe they have a right to participate in setting strategic direction"* (Thorne and Cuthbert, 1996, p.182). However, it could be argued that this must also apply within the individual institution in terms of the relationship between the university and its academic staff.

Given that the clash between the expectations of Government-based external pressures and internal academic culture may mean, as highlighted earlier, that matters cannot always be resolved to the absolute satisfaction of all groups, the task for Government in its relationship with the sector, and for universities in their relationship with academic staff, is the *"development of consent, if not consensus"* (Middlehurst, 1995, p.84).

In terms of this, it could be argued that Lockwood's (1987) approach of 'consensus building' could be used in *"...educating internal members about the external realities, structuring internal forces in a positive direction, and industriously creating support for the strategies..."* (p.104) and applied in both a sector-wide and individual institution context. Accordingly, trust, consultation and consent may lead to Harvey and Knight's (1996) 'new collegium' which is *"self critical and*

concerned to continually improve its processes and practices rather than rest content with traditional modes of functioning” and which has invested in “ownership and control of an overt, transparent process of continuous quality improvement rather than in the retention of a non-accountable, mystifying, opaque cloisterism” (p.71).

According to Dearlove (2002), the challenge for institutions, and hence the sector, is to reject the simplified polarities of a “*collegial golden age*” (p.257) and “*brave managerial future*”, and to show that they are “*capable of transcending the dichotomy between collegiality and managerialism*” (p.257). Indeed, despite perceptions that some academics hold onto a mythological collegiality that never truly existed, Henkel (2000) has found academia to be a “*relatively adaptive profession*” (p.8), seeing its response to external pressures on traditional autonomy as resulting in ‘reprofessionalisation’ rather than ‘deprofessionalisation’ (Fulton, 2001).

For Clark (1998), the challenge of responding to external pressures and traditional collegial strengths can come together in collective entrepreneurial endeavour. A reconciliation of managerial and academic values, accepted by the “*academic heartland*” (137), would mean a stronger institution, gaining resource through performance in a competitive market. Thus, new autonomy, with independent financing reducing reliance on Government, could be gained by an appropriate response to state challenges to sector and institutional autonomy. Of course, it could be argued that Clark’s “*collegial entrepreneurship*” (2001, p.15) is as unrealistic as the aforementioned ‘collegial golden age’.

3.6 Wider Relevance to the Public and Private Sectors

It is evident from the above literature that external quality assessment in Scottish universities sits within a broader context where internal environmental factors such as culture and professionalism respond to, and may resist, the demands emanating from environment factors such as legislation. Thus the current research can be viewed from a broader perspective that assesses the influence of an externally driven change process on a largely autonomous culture. It is argued that as both the private

and public sectors are bounded by internal and external environmental factors, the current research may have implications that extend beyond the Scottish university sector and quality assessment.

There are a number of features of the university sector context that link to the wider public sector. As highlighted, Government focus on university accountability was part of a wider push for economy, efficiency, and effectiveness across the UK public sector. In effect, the external environment, initially in the form of legislation but in itself empowering other external forces and stakeholders, such as funding bodies and students, impacted upon an internal environment that included cultural and professionalism factors. Indeed, Deem (2004) describes managerialism as *“a set of ideologies about organisational practices and values used to bring about radical shifts in the organisation, finances and cultures of public services such as local government, health or education”* (p.109).

The recurring use of approaches by Government in exposing the public sector and professionals to market forces, monitoring, and stakeholder power, is underlined by Deem (2004), Fowles (1993) and Preston (2001). An example of the shared experience by higher education and the wider public sector can be drawn from Dill’s (1997) analysis of the application of the concept of quasi-markets to the welfare state and also to higher education, whereby the Government moved from direct provider to a purchaser of service from competitors in an internal market. This ties in with Cuthbert’s (1999) assertion, set out in Chapter Two, that policy reforms created a market place wherein institutions would *“compete in proposing, while the funders would dispose”* (p.318).

The application of the principles of managerialism to the public sector, according to Lawler and Hearn (1995) is based on the assumption that *“there are certain core functions of management applicable across all organisational contexts and that certain management techniques can be transferred across contexts”* (p.8). Indeed, the prevalence of managerialism is found in the Child Protection Agency, the Prison Service (Barberis, 1998), schools, hospitals and other service providers (Hood,

2001). Not only does the impact of managerialism spread across the UK public sector but such principles have been applied to varying degrees to sister public sectors across the globe (Chandler et al, 2002; Dixon et al, 1998).

The Government belief in the application of managerialism to a number of contexts is highlighted by Williams (1997), who clarifies that in addition to the policy of applying private sector principles to the public sector, some organisations were moved from one sector to another via privatisation. Examples are public utilities such as gas, electricity, water, and telecommunications. More specifically, Dawson (1998) highlights that private sector mechanisms such as quality assurance systems have spread across a variety of industries and organisations.

As in the university sector, managerialism impacted upon the power of professionals in the wider public sector (Exworthy and Halford, 1999). Dent and Burtney (1996) consider that managerialism was aimed at *“redefining professionalism and professional autonomy”* (p.13), whilst Warwicker (1998) highlights that managerialism in the NHS was *“an attempt to subordinate and control professional practice”* (p.202).

As with academics, Firth (2002) highlights that managers in the NHS are caught between professional aspirations and regulatory requirements. Indeed, Fowles (1993) indicates that stakeholder involvement in the NHS led to a situation whereby *“notions of entitlement, rights and empowerment challenged the self-contained world of the professionals”* (p.99). In the same way as the Government sought to strike at the power of the academic profession, scandals involving health and social services highlighted the weaknesses in professional discretion in other public sector areas (Fowles, 1993).

The across the board application of managerialism to the public sector did not mean that each sub-sector felt exactly the same impact. Fowles (1993) considers that the political strength of a profession was a factor in determining how much it was exposed to the market, highlighting that opticians have been opened to the full

effects of the market. Further, according to Deem (2004) the shift to a stronger management focus was met differently in the higher education sector, where senior academics were usually senior managers, than in the NHS, where private sector managers were introduced. The installation of this cadre of managers in the NHS emphasised an already tense professional-manager relationship (Deem et al, 2000). This highlights that such ground is not solely occupied by higher education, where the credibility of the senior teams may be affected by whether they are viewed as peers by Heads of Departments and ground level academics.

The often tense interaction between external and internal environmental factors in terms of higher education is illustrated by the external accountability and quality assessment scenarios set out in Chapter Two and the discussion on culture and managerialism found in the current chapter. It is evident that such conflict and resistance in the face of change, more specifically managerialism and particularly with regard to professionals, has not been the sole preserve of the university sector.

Similarities can be drawn from the Lawler and Hearn (1995) analysis of managerialism in the social services, which highlights that *“professionals are noted for their resistance to rules, standards and supervision imposed upon them within larger organizations and maintain their loyalty to their profession as a counterbalancing power”* (p.11). Indeed, the same study indicates a tension between professionalism and the values of management; a move from administration to management; and that workers higher up the hierarchy are seen as managers rather than senior professionals. This latter aspect was also found in the private sector in areas such as accountancy.

Further, Broadbent et al (2001) found evidence of organisational resistance among doctors, with individual strategies adopted that provided only a limited, surface level compliance. Moreover, the public sector study by MacAuley et al (2000) highlighted that *“professionals discover ways of managing that meet both individual and organizational contingencies, and that they also find ways of absorbing and shaping changes which emanate from their external environment”* (p.88).

The wider power conflict between the university sector and the state is to an extent mirrored in the experience of the NHS. Just as Morley (2003) calls for an informed higher education debate about the internalisation of effective processes and a move away from the political power game, Firth (2002) highlights that other sectors hold similar desires: *“the hope...is that the NHS will come to lose its status as an ideological battleground and that its management will be directed towards its functioning rather than towards its politics”* (p.64).

Indeed, parallels can be drawn between the potential power-related impact of the external environment in both higher education and the wider public sector. Although, the concepts of criteria and operational power highlighted earlier can be used to explain stakeholder power in higher education (Cuthbert and Thorne, 1996), the original application of the Winstanley et al (1995) power matrix was in relation to health policy and assessed the success of professionals in developing viable protection strategies in the face of diminishing operational and criteria power. In terms of the link with the private sector, the power matrix was actually borne from the industry practice of analysing the importance of various stakeholders and their respective influence on company success.

In terms of accountability, the distinction between the public and private sectors can be blurred. For example, universities could be argued to be autonomous institutions, though heavily reliant on the public purse. Further, Fowles (1993) illustrates the complexity of the situation by asking where accountability would lie when the running of a British prison was contracted to an American public company: *“with the Home Secretary (i.e. the Minister constitutionally responsible for the prison system) or the shareholders?”* (p.97).

In terms of managerialism specifically, there is some commonality between sectors, with this agenda having impacted upon private sector professionals in organisations such as the legal profession, the criminal justice system and within professional service organisations generally (MacAuley et al, 2000). Indeed, Firth (2002) asserts

that “*managerialism has affected all other commercial and government-run organisations*” (p.60).

The link between the higher education and public sector experience of managerialism and the private sector can also be drawn from Winstanley et al’s (1995) analysis of public sector restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s. In effect, the emergence of factors including published performance criteria; an emphasis on value for money; the introduction of private sector management methods and business-like concepts; and an emphasis on consumer power has made the previously shielded public sector more open to external environmental factors, a situation that the private sector has long been accustomed to.

Although public sector managerialism is a transfer of private sector ideals, it could be argued that, missions and goals aside, at an organisational level there is much in common between these sectors. For example, the current research is undertaken in a context where an autonomous sector and its organisations react to external pressures. Similarly, the private sector must heed changes in its external environment, be these legal, political, economic, technological, sociocultural or ecological forces (Daft and Marcic, 2003; Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004; Johnson and Scholes, 2002). Indeed, White (2000) highlights that the public sector, like the private sector, often must respond to turbulent environmental conditions and manage change accordingly.

Moreover, whilst a key contextual element in the current research is the cultural reaction of the sector and its institutions to externally driven changes, private sector organisations also have internal environments wherein corporate cultures, which can vary widely, embody “*key values, beliefs, understandings, and the norms that members of an organisation share*” (Daft and Marcic, 2003, p.63). Further, both the internal and external environments can be forces for change and individuals and organisational culture may accept or resist such drivers (Daft and Marcic, 2003; Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004). Indeed, White (2000) has highlighted that the need for interaction between different organisations and stakeholders “*may give rise to*

heightened anxieties, ambiguities and complexities which can create a barrier to organisational change” (p.163).

In terms of external demands for quality assurance, at first sight private and public sector responses appear to be polarised. For example, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) argue that industry developments regarding quality assurance were accepted as a basis for ensuring market share, and often resulted in the empowerment and increased morale of employees. Meanwhile, in general terms, it appears that higher education’s principled opposition to types of accountability have fostered the perception that external quality assessment is the embodiment of managerialism.

However, just as the conflict regarding higher education external quality assessment is a complex one, it is evident that private sector reactions to change generally and quality assurance specifically, are less than uniform. For example, Dawson (1998) considers that quality assurance can be viewed by some as “*yet one more task to accomplish with ever decreasing resources*” (p.5) and may be resisted, as could cultural change aimed at professionals. Indeed, the suggestion that “*professionals are becoming proletarianized*” (MacAuley, 2000, p.90) echoes the claim that external developments have led to a deprofessionalisation of academic staff (Fulton 2001). Further, it is evident from Dawson’s (1998) comments that quality management developments can be externally imposed on industries, with powerful customers exercising what has earlier been referred to as criteria and operational power by requiring that quality systems are adopted and determining how they should function. Moreover, parallels can be drawn between the higher education experience and that of industry. For example, Ezzamel et al (2001) found in their study of a manufacturing factory that workers operated various forms of resistance to change and that this was borne from their identification with established practices and their sense of identity linked to a ‘golden age’.

As has been emphasised earlier, the rationale for academic resistance to external accountability, and indeed to quality assessment, is complex. The context set out in Chapter Two indicates that more than a decade of careful negotiations led to a

substantial shift in process. Again, there may be a crossover between higher education and the private sector. For Waddell and Sohal (1998) consider that resistance to change has utility in that it can point out the fallacy that change is inherently good, highlighting weakness in inappropriate plans and bringing the motivation to address perceived problems. Indeed, *“while pressures from external and internal environments continue to encourage change, resistance is a factor that can balance these demands against the need for constancy and stability”* (p.545).

It seems that the difficulty can be in bringing the external and internal environments together in a period of change. Waddell and Sohal assert that industry views resistance as *“the enemy of change”* (p.545). The reaction of industry is to *“meet force with force”*, where participative techniques *“amount to little more than an exercise in salesmanship and clearly illustrate an adversarial management mindset”* (p.546). Indeed, Kreitner et al (1999) describe resistance as a *“problem”* and refer to *“carefully cultivated changes that died on the vine because of resistance to change”* (p.594).

In addition to highlighting that the university sector experience of externally driven change processes shares some common ground with both the wider public sector and the private sector, perhaps the above discussion also serves to emphasise that the Coram and Burnes (2001) conclusion that *“there is no ‘one best way’ to manage change”* (p.100) and that approaches must suit the specific situation, applies to higher education, the public sector, and the private sector alike.

3.7 Summary

Building upon the research context set out in Chapter Two, the exploration in the current chapter of existing literature has aided the research in several ways. Firstly, a discussion of literature relating to external quality assessment in universities has established that there is a scope for further research and has aided the formulation of the research question and propositions, and the definition of the levels of analysis.

Chapter Two highlighted that external quality assessment processes were integral parts of a detailed and on-going policy conflict between the university sector and the Government and its agencies. Against this background, state-sector and institution-department managerialism, initially discussed in Chapter Two with regard to the higher education public policy developments, were further explored. This provided additional insight in relation to how university cultures, also explored in detail, could potentially impact upon the opportunity for external processes such as quality assessment to have a long-term positive influence.

The importance to this thesis of exploring this avenue of the academic literature is evident. The charting of the evolution of non-collegial cultural influences such as managerialism provides the thesis with a greater understanding that ostensibly collegial academics could feel that SHEFC TQA and Subject Review were externally imposed and would thus feel less ownership of them and value them less. Of course, the interface must not be solely viewed regarding individual academics and their reaction to external accountability but must recognise the changing relationship between institutions and Government, and institutions and their academic staff. Thus, although the focus of the research is the long-term catalytic influence of external quality assessment, it is evidenced that this must be considered within the context of higher education public policy and managerialism.

Further, the current chapter, through a discussion of managerialism, professionalism, resistance to change and other internal and external environmental factors, clarifies that the research focus may have theoretical implications not only for higher education public policy but also for the wider public and the private sectors.

Building on the research question, propositions and levels of analysis defined in the current chapter, Chapter Four will discuss and detail the philosophical and methodological approaches adopted and the research design utilised by the research.

Chapter Four

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the philosophical and methodological approach used by this research. Central to the chapter is the definition and justification of the research design used. Each aspect of the research is inter-linked. The research propositions indicate the issues to be examined by the study. These have led to the consideration of specific evidence in line with the adoption of an appropriate philosophical and methodological approach, and resulting research design (Yin, 1994).

Chapter Two and Chapter Three provided a valuable insight into the cultural relationships within universities and how these might be affected by higher education public policy developments. The relationship between the Government (and its agencies) and the higher education sector, and also the relationship between institutions and their departments, represents the background to the assessment of the long-term catalytic influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. As highlighted in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, the acceptance of methods of assessing quality assurance may have an influence on whether the processes have a positive impact on institutional and departmental approaches.

As noted in Chapter Three, the following propositions are drawn from the research question:

1. The implementation and operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities has had a positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

2. The positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, has occurred across the Scottish university sector, even though institutions are culturally distinct.
3. The benefits to be gained from SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of the processes. Such negative perspectives and the substantial focus on research performance could erode the benefits gained. For the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching to continue to be positively influenced by external processes on a long-term basis, future approaches must instil ownership of quality assurance with subject level academics while retaining a level of institutional assessment sufficient to satisfy the existing external accountability obligation.

In line with the above research propositions, the primary units of analysis are the thirteen universities in the Scottish higher education sector. Each of the universities participated in this research. As noted in Chapter Two, SHEFC TQA was introduced after legislation cleared the way for more institutions to become part of the university sector. Given that institutional culture is a key issue within this thesis, the thirteen institutions have been distinguished (see Table 4.1) in terms of whether they gained university status before or after the enactment of the Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland) (1992). With reference to the enlargement of the Scottish university sector that the 1992 Act brought, the constituent institutions are categorised as being either pre-1992 universities (i.e. institutions that were universities prior to the 1992 Act) or post-1992 universities (i.e. institutions that became universities subsequent to the 1992 Act).

Table 4.1: Scottish Universities

| | |
|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Pre-1992 | University of Aberdeen |
| | University of Dundee |
| | University of Edinburgh |
| | University of Glasgow |
| | Heriot-Watt University |
| | University of St Andrews |
| | University of Stirling |
| | University of Strathclyde |
| ----- | ----- |
| Post-1992 | University of Abertay |
| | Glasgow Caledonian University |
| | Napier University |
| | University of Paisley |
| | Robert Gordon University |

4.2 Methodological Options: Phenomenological and Positivist Philosophies; Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies

Having defined the research propositions, the next step is to establish the research approach to be adopted. An important starting point is to consider the philosophical aspects of the study. This is because the chosen stance will help identify which approaches to data collection and analysis are most appropriate, and accordingly will aid the clarification of the research design itself (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). In turn, the research design logically links the research questions to the data collection and analysis phases of the study (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1988, Creswell, 1998). In doing so it also addresses the practicalities and operational aspects of undertaking the research (Creswell, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). In essence, the procedural research design identifies the techniques used to carry out the study and is underpinned by a strategy based on defined philosophical assumptions (Miller, 1997). As such, before the research design is detailed, philosophical approaches to the study are considered and, with regard to the chosen approach, the methodological issues most appropriate to this research are identified.

Easterby-Smith et al (1991) cite the two main philosophical research traditions as being positivism and phenomenology, though acknowledge that these are often viewed from stereotypical positions and in practice philosophical stances can be placed at multiple points along the spectrum between positivism and phenomenology. The phenomenological paradigm believes that there is a socially constructed, subjective world, where the observer is part of what is being observed, and where science is driven by human interests. These features have been seen as typical of qualitative research (Merriam, 1988). In contrast, the positivist paradigm has an external, objective world, where the observer is independent, and science is value-free (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991).

Researchers following the phenomenological tradition will generally use multiple methods to establish different views of the phenomenon, and investigate small samples in depth or over time. In contrast, positivists operationalise concepts to allow them to be measured, and take large samples when carrying out their research (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991; Creswell, 1998). Generally but not always, positivism is associated with quantitative methods and the phenomenological paradigm with qualitative methods (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). Qualitative and quantitative approaches differ in three major ways: the former favours the attainment of understanding in contrast to the latter's explanation; the former has the researcher in an active role in contrast to the impersonal latter; and the former focuses on the construction of knowledge rather than the latter's discovery of knowledge (Stake, 1995).

4.3 The Adoption of a Qualitative Methodology

Underpinned by the phenomenological research tradition, a qualitative methodology has been chosen for this research because the research question focuses on the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, rather than the more quantitative, cause and effect issue of why these changes happened (Merriam, 1988). In addition to this, the chosen units of analysis require a research methodology intent on exploring the

issues at the heart of the research even though specifically focused theories are not currently available to explain the behaviour of universities in this specific research context. The ontological viewpoint of qualitative study serves this in that it allows the research to consider reality to be that which is constructed by individuals involved in the research situation (Creswell, 1998). In terms of this study, this meant the realities of key informants (principally university staff) with appropriate institutional and departmental experience of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. Accordingly, this research took into account contextual issues such as the relationship between institutions and their departments. It was also sensitive to underlying meanings when gathering and interpreting raw data in order to create a detailed view of the study and achieve an in-depth understanding of the units of analysis (Merriam, 1988) i.e. the Scottish universities.

In order to present the research data and findings accurately, and to provide the reader with an opportunity to share some of the researcher's experiences, it is essential that respondents' perceptions, researcher's interpretations, and the research context are presented in a detailed manner. However, in doing so, the research acknowledges that the axiological assumption of qualitative research recognises the existence of biases and the reality that the research will be value laden. Thus, the research recognises that knowledge is associated with the meanings that people ascribe to it; individual biases and values are integrated with these meanings; and knowledge is linked to the very context in which it is studied (Creswell, 1998). The research also acknowledges that tied to this is the ontological philosophical assumption within qualitative research that multiple realities depend on the individual and his or her perception of events. As such, this research recognises the importance of context and values in the search for knowledge. As discussed later (see section 4.7), the research employed both non-probability, purposeful sampling and a triangulated approach to data gathering. Purposeful sampling selects cases most likely to aid the study in terms of understanding, insight and discovery. Triangulation employs multiple sources of data to gain corroboration of evidence, providing appropriate, validated, information for a contextually rich picture of the study (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1998).

Given that this study did not directly follow on from previous research, and that it also recognised the multiple realities of the university staff participating in the study, a qualitative methodology was appropriate because it involved the utilisation of an evolving research design. From the outset it was acknowledged that the focus of the initial research questions could be refined, and as such throughout the process they were continually reviewed as a greater understanding of the study was attained (Creswell, 1998). Also, although the three main propositions of this research have been defined, there were a multitude of factors influencing their subject matter. For example, the Government policy of externally assessing the quality of learning and teaching provision was not the only external pressure on universities and departments. Further, the operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review was not the sole interaction between universities and their departments. Qualitative methods were adopted because they were more flexible and suitable for this study than quantitative methods, which, by their very nature, required clearly defined, limited variables.

A principal element of the research process was to interview key actors in their natural settings to allow them to present their views in the context that they related to and to encourage informants to express their perceptions. This linked with the evolving research and contextually rich approach of the qualitative methodology adopted. The epistemological assumption made by qualitative inquiry serves this aim in that it endeavours to minimise the distance between the researcher and the study. Another factor in choosing a qualitative approach was that its rhetorical assumption allowed the researcher to relay the research in a personal, literary form, utilising qualitative terminology (Creswell, 1998). Indeed, a detailed, contextually rich, description of the study might provide readers with a more intimate relationship with the research and could aid them in drawing their own conclusions based on their own understandings (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998).

A phenomenological approach also emphasises the researcher's role as one of an 'active learner' whereby the research can be presented as far as possible from the respondent's viewpoint rather than the researcher passing judgement. The

presentation of data was based on a mixture of the participants' perspectives and the researcher's own interpretation of these views within the overall research (Creswell, 1998). However, interpretation and assertions were not hastily made, rather they were drawn from a patient and reflective consideration of the information and there was a willingness to take on board other views (Stake, 1995). The methodological assumption was one that allowed the research to tackle the study in the context of the imposition of external accountability upon universities and their departments, and continually refine the questions as the research developed (Creswell, 1998). Indeed, a key element in undertaking a qualitative case study is for the researcher to assume a role that seeks to continually interpret matters (Stake, 1995). However, it was recognised that although the researcher should endeavour to increasingly understand the case, he should not enter the research with a blank mind but with assumptions and theories about what might be discovered (Merriam, 1988).

In essence, the qualitative methodology adopted embodied a way of viewing the world and tackling sampling, data gathering, analysis, validity and reliability. It permitted the utilisation of methods to explore the issues in a way that informed the research during the process and allowed the study to develop and more accurately address the propositions at its heart (Merriam, 1988).

4.4 The Adoption of a Case Study Approach

Although a qualitative methodology was adopted, there were a variety of approaches within qualitative inquiry that may have been applicable to the research. Indeed the consideration of these methods led to a more informed decision as to which option was best suited to the research at hand, and accordingly aided the construction of an appropriate research design. For example, an ethnographic study would have heavily utilised observation, resulting in a description and interpretation of the cultural group or system (Creswell, 1998). However, SHEFC TQA, which was the process that operated for the bulk of the research period ceased in 1998; as such this approach was not possible.

The qualitative method chosen for this research was that of the case study. This design was identified as an appropriate methodology for researching matters such as policy implementation, management issues, and organisational cultures in institutions (Hakim, 1992). A case study approach allowed the research to study the particularity and complexity of the units of analysis, the Scottish universities, and provided an understanding of the activity of satisfying external accountability within the specific context of learning and teaching provision (Stake, 1995). The aim was to contribute to the existing knowledge base by discovering the perspectives of the actors in the study situation and by adding insight and understanding to them (Merriam 1988). The qualitative case studies were carried out to research the defined units of analysis with the primary aim of understanding the cases better as opposed to understanding cases outside the research. In line with this aim, the study did not adopt traditional sampling, rather the selection of cases was based on the maximisation of learning. The cases selected were those most likely to facilitate a greater understanding of the topic, and thus possibly lead to interpretation/assertions and perhaps the modification of generalisations. Practical research issues were also considered when selecting the cases, in terms of access and the likelihood of co-operative informants (Stake, 1995).

However, the key factor in selection was what a particular case could contribute to the study. This meant selecting universities that would allow for access to research participants with sufficient institutional or departmental experience of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review to enable an assessment of the research propositions to be drawn from the information they provided. The case study method provided an opportunity to study a phenomenon in a real life context where the boundaries were not always clearly evident, and as such allowed for such contextual conditions to become part of the research (Yin, 1994).

In essence, the units of analysis were defined by their bounded system (Merriam, 1988). The selected university case studies explored in depth bounded systems defined by time and place, where the integral parts of the case came together to form a whole (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988). However, establishing the external

accountability of learning and teaching boundaries of the cases was challenging because, as noted in Chapter Two, many different factors affect higher education (Creswell, 1998). For example, the perspectives that departments and institutions had of their relationships, in terms of the operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review, could potentially be shaped by other department-institution interactions.

The definition of the unit of analysis (the bounded system) flowed from the initial research questions and aided the research in defining the research design with regard to matters such as data gathering and analysis (Yin, 1994). The very nature of the study itself limited the research to finite areas in terms of geography (Scotland), time period (1992-2002), and general context (universities) (Creswell, 1998).

The research included all thirteen universities in the Scottish higher education sector. Each of the thirteen Scottish universities was considered as a separate case (Creswell, 1998). However, the data gained from each of these individual case studies was considered collectively to enable the Scottish university sector to be viewed as a case study in its own right. The cases were seen as being of an instrumental nature in that they were selected to gain an understanding of the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the enhancement or revitalisation of institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. The focus of the research remained the study of the influence of the operation of the processes rather than focusing on the intrinsic cases of each university (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). It was recognised that within the cases the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review was closely tied up with political, social, historical and personal contexts at sector, institutional, departmental, and individual member of staff levels. These factors and their meanings added to the understanding of the case and the issues. However, of key importance to the research was ensuring that the cases and the issues were kept in focus (Stake, 1995).

The cases were considered first individually (within-case analysis) and then collectively (cross-case analysis) to add understanding to the study (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988). An additional benefit of using several cases in the study was that it might increase the possibility that the conclusions drawn from the study could be generalised beyond this particular research, for this broader evidence might be more appealing, regarding generalisability, than the outcome of a single case study (Merriam, 1988).

The adoption of the case study approach enabled the attainment of a detailed description of the impact of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on institutions and their departments. Following on from this, themes were identified and analysed and interpretations/assertions were made (Creswell, 1998). The final process used is detailed in the research design (see section 4.8). The benefit of the adopted approach was that it offered the opportunity to investigate and offer insights into the complex, real-life, social units within universities and to present tentative hypothesis that might aid the structuring of future research and add to the existing knowledge base in relation to higher education policy and beyond (Merriam, 1988).

4.5 Triangulation

An important issue in qualitative research is to be accurate in measurement and logical in the interpretation of the meaning of those measurements. Thus triangulation protocols were used to provide greater evidence of validity (Stake, 1995). Varying research methods exist and are based on different assumptions, and accordingly have specific approaches to assessing validity and reliability (Merriam, 1988). Indeed, many different terms have been used to describe verification. The use of alternative terms has been seen as pointing to the distinctive, legitimate nature of a qualitative approach (Creswell, 1998). However, concerns essentially relate to internal validity, reliability, and external validity (Merriam, 1988).

For this thesis, inherent difficulties in undertaking a qualitative case study were the subjective nature of the research and the possibility that the researcher might misinterpret data (Stake, 1995). Internal validity relates to whether research findings

match reality. Given that qualitative research assumes the existence of multiple realities, the question of internal validity is addressed in terms of what the researcher experiences rather than that of an absolute reality that cannot be grasped. To satisfy questions of internal validity, research should attempt to show that the actors' perspectives are accurately represented (Merriam, 1988). Verification can be seen as a key strength of qualitative research because it provides an opportunity to point to the time spent in the field, the detailed description offered, and the closeness to the study's participants that adds value to the research (Creswell, 1998). In the present study, several methods were adopted to aid the verification of the research. Triangulation employed multiple sources of data to gain corroboration of evidence. Further, the pre-understanding of the researcher was set out (see section 4.6) to identify possible biases (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988).

The issue of reliability is concerned with the extent to which the study's findings can be replicated. As with internal validity, qualitative research assumes that multiple realities exist, as such traditional methods of ensuring reliability cannot be applied. However, it has been argued by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that internal validity and reliability are inextricably linked and as such establishing internal validity accordingly establishes reliability. That said, Merriam notes that the repetition of accounts of an experience does not ensure reliability because these accounts can still be wrong. However, although achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not possible for qualitative research, the study can illustrate its consistency and dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) by using triangulation and its multiple methods of data collection (Yin, 1994). This incorporates laying an audit trail to allow readers to see how data was collected and interpreted and setting out the researcher's assumptions and approach regarding the study, providing details of how informants and cases were selected together with background on the social context of the study (Merriam, 1988). Thus, triangulation and clarification of researcher pre-understanding, together with the provision of comprehensive details on the gathering of data, were utilised in this research to aid its reliability.

External validity concerns the extent to which the research findings can be applied to other situations. Such generalisability was difficult to establish in the present study given that it used purposeful sampling, with cases and informants chosen for their likely contribution to the study rather than on a scientific representational basis. Although the qualitative, and according purposeful sampling approach, limited the research in terms of establishing external validity, the research employed techniques to improve the generalisability of the findings. The research provided a 'thick description' through the presentation of the research data gathered from the cases to provide readers with the opportunity to use this as a basis for their own judgements (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Also, the study undertook research at all thirteen Scottish universities, indicating that the findings were drawn from a broad base of research (Merriam, 1988).

As stated at the beginning of this section, important issues for qualitative research are accuracy of measurement and the logical interpretation of the meaning of those measurements. Thus, as highlighted, triangulation protocols were used to provide greater evidence of validity. However, the researcher was aware that the more he subscribed to the view that reality was constructed, the greater the difficulty there would have been in triangulating interpretations, and in such a situation triangulation would have become less of a confirmation of an interpretation and more of a search for alternatives (Stake, 1995).

It has been argued that triangulation can satisfy the requirement for validity by essentially providing multiple measures of the same aspect (Yin, 1994). Indeed, some consider that given that qualitative study focuses in detail on its data sources, the information obtained can be viewed as correct and complete reports from the respondents and as such validity is attained (Hakim, 1992). However, there is also the view that methods such as triangulation cannot establish validity, because this is not possible in qualitative studies, but that such methods can provide additional data relevant to validity because they can bring the researcher a heightened awareness of how he has formulated his research findings (Bloor, 1997).

In summary, triangulation was used to gather data from multiple sources and to minimise the researcher's misperceptions and any resulting invalidity of interpretations and conclusions (Stake, 1995). For example, one source might have led the researcher to interpret a meaning while another might have caused the researcher to refine that interpretation. In essence, if there existed a likelihood of a dispute about an important issue, the researcher provided more detail with which to substantiate the interpretation. However, triangulation took up significant time and as such only the most important data and interpretations were deliberately triangulated. The importance of a piece of data or claim was dependent on how it aided the understanding of the research and how much it clarified or differentiated between alternative views (Stake, 1995). Essentially, contextual data was obtained from various sources and merged together (Hakim, 1992). Triangulation was employed as a method of using a variety of types of evidence to strengthen the research and add corroboration by identifying and developing converging lines of study (Yin, 1994).

4.6 Pre-Understanding of the Researcher

Another aid to the credibility of the study, highlighted earlier, is the setting out of the pre-understanding of the researcher. A prior knowledge of the subject matter can have both beneficial and detrimental effects. The researcher has considerable experience of an academic quality assurance role in a Scottish university. Such experience provided an opportunity to readily recognise clear themes and important developments regarding the quality assurance of learning and teaching. However, this same experience could lead to pre-research opinions about the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). The awareness of these positive and negative aspects allowed the researcher to address these individual matters appropriately when they occurred. Further, openly identifying them might also aid readers in their consideration of the possibility of researcher bias when they read the thesis.

The researcher has worked for ten years in the central administration of a Scottish university, with five of these years focused on the internal and external quality assurance of learning and teaching. Experience in the implementation of external quality assurance procedures in higher education has led to an acknowledgement that such measures can inhibit, as well as foster, institutional and departmental developments regarding the assurance and improvement of the quality of learning and teaching provision.

Although the prior experience of the researcher provided a pivotal insight when shaping the original research propositions in the light of previous empirical studies, the researcher actively sought input from various sources in an effort to refine these. For example, the researcher's experience of the context behind, and underlying rationale for, SHEFC Teaching Quality Assessment had largely been from a university perspective. As noted in Chapter Two, to balance this, the researcher discussed in detail his understanding of these issues with key SHEFC personnel to ensure that a broader perspective was attained. Throughout the study, further detail and additional perspectives were sought to balance the pre-understanding of the researcher.

The pre-understanding of the researcher and the approach of the study itself raises issues concerning both the validity and reliability of the research. The research acknowledges that the qualitative case study approach adopted has led to the research becoming very much a personal undertaking, as such the researcher's perspectives will have influenced his interpretation of the meanings discovered. Indeed, owing to this personal aspect, the interaction between the researcher, the cases and their actors may not be reproducible. However reproducibility is not the basis of the quality and utility of this form of research, rather, such quality depends on whether the meaning generated by the research or its readers are valued (Stake, 1995).

4.7 Sampling

A key element in formulating the research design was establishing which universities would be included in the data gathering sample. The basic distinction between

sampling approaches is whether or not the method is carried out on a probability basis. Probability sampling allows the research to generalise results by making statistical inferences based on the sample, whereas non-probability sampling does not allow for such inferences. Probability sampling permits the identification of the probability that each element of the specified population will be included in the sample. Given the nature of qualitative study, such probability cannot be assured and as such non-probability sampling is the chosen option. Within a non-probability approach this research used purposeful sampling, which selected the cases that were most likely to add to the study in terms of understanding, insight and discovery (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1998). Cases were not selected because they represented what was thought to be typical but rather because of what they might contribute to the understanding of the issues being researched, and then possibly the understanding of other cases (Stake, 1995).

A purposeful sampling strategy for selecting the cases and the information required had to be identified (Creswell, 1998). Several options existed with regard to purposeful sampling. These include selecting cases that were at extremes to each other or that were recommended to the researcher by key informants (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1998). For the first stage, Institutional Interviews were undertaken across a comprehensive case selection involving all thirteen Scottish universities. The Institutional Interviewees were selected after discussions with key informants. The key informants had extensive experience of the external accountability of learning and teaching provision in Scottish universities and could identify individuals in the sector who could aid the study. In the second stage, Head of Department Interviews were undertaken at a single university owing to the likelihood that the researcher's close links with the institution would aid the selection of participants with appropriate departmental management and external assessment experience and who would openly inform the study. Regarding both of these stages, within the single cases were embedded more specific case studies, with individual institutions and departments represented by each interviewee. The third stage Sector Interviews involved purposefully selecting, after discussions with key informants, participants

with a detailed knowledge and experience of sector developments regarding the external accountability of learning and teaching.

The following sections establish the rationale behind the research design; detail the data collection and analysis procedures; and discuss possible limitations of the chosen approach.

4.8 Research Design Rationale

The research design set out below evolved after consideration of the initial research questions and of the philosophical and methodological approaches adopted. As highlighted, a triangulated approach was utilised to increase the validity, reliability, and generalisability of the research. As indicated in the previous section, data was gathered in three stages: Institutional Interviews; Head of Department Interviews; and Sector Interviews. This section will outline the rationale behind each of these stages and establish how they are linked together. Subsequent sections will provide details of data collection procedure (section 4.9); data analysis methods (section 4.10); and limitations (section 4.11) relating to the study.

The first stage of data collection involved undertaking Institutional Interviews at each of the thirteen Scottish universities. In line with the purposeful sampling approach, participants with appropriate experience of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were sought.

Although a comprehensive sample was taken in terms of using each of the thirteen Scottish universities, the appropriate selection of appropriate participants remained an essential task. Since the early days of SHEFC TQA, the COSHEP (now Universities Scotland) Teaching Quality Forum brought together senior academic and administrative university staff with responsibility for learning and teaching quality assurance issues. Accordingly, the current membership of the Teaching Quality Forum was a key source of potential participants. The selection of participants was discussed with three key informants within the researcher's home institution, with the intention of identifying the most suitable interviewees. The key

informants were members of the Teaching Quality Forum and were closely involved with their own institution's quality assurance of learning and teaching provision. The key informants were not included in the research given that they would be used to discuss the selection of participants at all three stages of the data gathering and would also be asked to consider the clarity of the wording of documentation provided to participants.

Initially two members of staff from each university were sought as participants. From the researcher's own experience and after discussion with key informants, it was considered that in most universities a very small number of staff could provide the institutional insight that the study sought. Generally, this meant seeking the participation of the University senior officer with responsibility for learning and teaching and the senior administrator charged with aiding this task.

This stage of data collection sought to obtain the perspectives of key informants who were, or had been, closely involved with the institutional management of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review within their university. The case studies chosen were of an instrumental nature in that the aim was to understand the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review rather than to understand solely the intrinsic case of each particular university (Stake, 1995). This also allowed for a comparison between cases in order to consider whether the SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review influenced universities in the same way even though they were culturally distinct. However, the individual university cases were also considered collectively to enable wider policy conclusions to be drawn from the experience of the sector as a whole. Annex C provides the name, position, and institution of each Institutional Interview participant at the time the interviews were undertaken.

The second stage of data gathering involved undertaking Head of Department Interviews. Participants were asked to provide their perspectives on the operation and influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. The Head of Department Interviews were used to build upon the data gathered from the Institutional

Interviews and also to aid a consideration of whether the views expressed were consistent with the perspectives of the Institutional Interviewees.

The selection of cases and participants for the Head of Department Interview stage posed greater problems than in the Institutional Interview stage. For each stage of data gathering the key aim was to select participants that not only had appropriate knowledge of the operation and influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review in a specific setting (institution, department, or sector) but who would openly and honestly discuss such matters. The Institutional Interview stage did not pose a problem in terms of the open discussion of the research focus. This was because the interviewees selected were colleagues of the researcher's key informants and as such an element of trust was established at an early point. Further, the researcher offered to visit each Institutional Interviewee to discuss the nature and purpose of the research prior to them agreeing to participate. This served to increase the trust between both parties. Institutional Interviewees were aware that the study would be undertaken without ulterior motive and that confidentiality of the content of the interviews was guaranteed. The researcher was confident that the participants would discuss issues openly and honestly.

A number of issues had to be addressed when considering the selection of cases and participants regarding the Head of Department Interview stage. First of all, unlike in the Institutional Interview stage, the researcher would not be able to select the pool of potential participants because relevant internal information as to the holders of Head of Department roles during the 1992-2002 period would require access to confidential personnel records held by each university. This would mean that the research would have had to rely on the Institutional Interviewees in each of the universities to aid participant selection. This could pose problems because although trust had been established between the researcher and the Institutional Interviewees it meant that selection of participants was in their hands and not those of the researcher.

Further, the Institutional Interviewees were senior members of academic and administrative staff and were unlikely to be able to invest time to carefully consider

participant selection in the way that the researcher had with the Institutional Interview stage. Also, the initial element of trust provided by the Institutional Interviewees knowing the researcher's key informants would not exist with the Institutional Interviewee-selected Head of Department Interviewee participants.

Additionally, Institutional Interviewees had agreed to participate on an individual basis, whereas interviewing Heads of Departments, as well Institutional Interviewees, would likely mean that consent of each university Principal would be required. Not only might this be difficult to obtain but this route could also increase the possibility of participants being selected according to the views of others.

Purposeful sampling enabled the identification of participants who had the knowledge base required to inform the research and allowed selection to remain within the control of the researcher, whereas probability sampling could have identified additional participants at institutional and Head of Department level but they may not have had an equivalent knowledge base to those purposefully selected, thus weakening the overall quality of the data obtained.

Similarly, overly relying on others to help select participants would weaken the independence of the research and in all likelihood, given that a single person would not undertake this task, provide considerable variance in the knowledge base of participants. Indeed, as highlighted in Chapter Three, the selection of the participants by the researcher was the first stage in a vital process of gaining the confidence, openness, and honesty of participants. Further, the introduction of varied participants could mean that the contextual background against which the data was considered would vary and thus make it extremely difficult to make assessments of bias or of the integrity of the data.

As stated earlier, the key aim in gathering data was to obtain information of a high quality that would inform the study as to the operation and influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. Essential to obtaining such data was the selection of

participants with appropriate background knowledge of the research focus and who would openly and honestly provide their perceptions.

Accordingly, a single case study university was selected owing to the researcher's close links with a specific institution. However, within this single university case study, smaller departmental case studies, represented by the Head of Department Interviewees, were embedded. Owing to close links with the selected university, the researcher had access to non-confidential institutional documentation that aided the selection of appropriate participants. From this it was possible to involve ten participants that had been Head of Department; who were members of departments during SHEFC TQA/QAA Subject Review assessments; and who had also been either SHEFC Assessors or QAA Reviewers. Indeed, of the ten participants two had been seconded to SHEFC to aid the development of the quality assessment process and four had been Lead Assessors.

This meant that not only did the participants have experience of the processes within their departments but they also had a detailed knowledge of the operation of the processes. Accordingly, they could provide a Head of Department perspective on the operation and influence of such processes. Further an element of trust was established given that the participants knew the researcher's key informants; the Principal of the university had consented to the study being undertaken (but had played no role in participant selection); and most participants had previously interacted with the researcher.

A potential disadvantage was that because only a single university was involved, assertions drawn from the data gathered from the Head of Department Interviews might require additional justification if they were to be applied to the sector as a whole. However, this concern can be disregarded for three reasons.

Firstly, the data gathered from the Institutional Interviews, which can readily be linked to the entire Scottish sector, would include perceptions of the influence on departments as well as institutions. Institutional Interviewees were well placed to comment on the influence on departments given that many had been Heads of

Departments and/or SHEFC Lead Assessor or Assessors. Further, by the very nature of their institutional role, all were closely involved in the university-department learning and teaching relationship. Regarding the third phase of data gathering, the Sector Interviews, the participants were well placed to comment in detail on the influence in departments given their in-depth experience of SHEFC TQA, QAA Subject Review and of university cultures and structures.

It should be noted that the triangulation of evidence was utilised where appropriate across the three sets of interviews. The above paragraph highlights that the Institutional Interview and Sector Interview data could corroborate the Head of Department Interviews. However, the Head of Department Interviews could also corroborate the Institutional Interview and Sector Interview data because not only were Heads of Department in a suitable position to develop a perspective on institutional and sector developments but some of the participants also had experience as Deans, university Senior Officers, and as members of key sector committees involved in discussions on the external accountability of learning and teaching.

Secondly, as highlighted, the single university case study was chosen for the likelihood of obtaining a consistently high quality of the data, as were the interviewees in all three data gathering stages. If it was clearly evident from the research results that the themes that emerged were consistent across all three sets of interviews, it would be reasonable to conclude that the data gathered from the Head of Department Interviewees was considerably more likely to be representative of the Scottish sector than misrepresentative.

Thirdly, the purposeful sample of Head of Department Interviewees taken within the single university case study involved academic departments that were broadly representative of the variety and volume of academic provision found within the Scottish sector. The interviewees were from ten departments that provided a range of coverage across SHEFC-assessed cognate areas, representing varying sizes of departments and cognate areas across the sector. Table 4.2 illustrates this spread.

Within the table the names of the cognate areas have been made anonymous to safeguard the identity of the case study university and the Head of Department Interviewees. Letters A to J indicate different departments, each of which was included in the Head of Department case study phase of the research. To illustrate the breadth of coverage, a different colour represents a different faculty in the case study institution. The table notes the number and percentage of universities that had a SHEFC TQA assessment in the lettered cognate areas.

Given that during the two year operation of QAA Subject Review universities selected when their subjects were assessed during the (incomplete) half-cycle, to undertake the same analysis for the QAA process would not provide the same quality of information. However, it is noted that the Head of Department Interviews also included three departments that had experience of both SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review (non-pilot) assessments. These departments (E, G, and H) are asterisked in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Case Study Departments and Corresponding SHEFC Assessments 1992-1998

| Cognate Area of Case Study University | Number of Universities that underwent SHEFC TQA in Cognate Area | Percentage of Scottish Universities that underwent SHEFC TQA in Cognate Area |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A | 13 | 100 |
| B | 12 | 92 |
| C | 10 | 77 |
| D | 9 | 69 |
| E* | 7 | 54 |
| F | 6 | 46 |
| G* | 5 | 38 |
| H* | 5 | 38 |
| I | 4 | 31 |
| J | 3 | 23 |

*Department assessed under SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review

In addition to the selected departments representing a spread of departments across the sector, the faculties that they are hosted by in the case study university are widely present within the other universities across the Scottish sector. Table 4.3 illustrates the presence across the Scottish university sector of the four faculties that host the case study departments. For each of the lettered thirteen Scottish universities the presence of each of the four faculties included in the case study is indicated by a different colour. In both Table 4.2 and Table 4.3, the case study university has been included in order to enable the entire Scottish university sector to be represented.

Table 4.3: Case Study Faculties and Corresponding Faculties in the Scottish Sector

| University | Presence of Case Study Faculties in Scottish Universities | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Faculty 1 | Faculty 2 | Faculty 3 | Faculty 4 |
| A | | | | |
| B | - | | | |
| C | | - | | |
| D | | | | |
| E | | | | |
| F | | | | |
| G | - | | | |
| H | | | | |
| I | | | | |
| J | - | | - | |
| K | | | - | |
| L | | | - | |
| M | | | | |

Regarding, the relationship between the ten case studies and the single host university, the interviews represented approximately:

- 54% of the TQA assessments carried out in this university between 1992 and 1998. This percentage of assessments related to 47% of the total academic staff in subject areas assessed by TQA in this institution.
- 71% of the QAA assessments carried out at the University between 2000 and 2002. This percentage of assessments related to 75% of the total academic staff in subject areas assessed by QAA Subject Review in this institution.

Annex D does not name the anonymous case study or the participants but does set out a brief description of their background.

The third stage of data gathering involved Sector Interviewees. These would build upon the data gathered during the Institutional Interview and Head of Department Interview stages by adding a sector-wide perspective to the data already obtained. The review of sector documentation regarding external quality assessment indicated the most relevant people to invite to participate as Sector Interviewees. Key informants concurred with the selection made. The four Sector Interviewees consisted of a Principal from a post-1992 university, a Principal from a pre-1992 university, the Head of the QAA Scottish Office, and the SHEFC Deputy Director (Quality and Learning Innovation). The nature of the experience of the Sector Interviewees additionally allowed them to provide valuable insight into the interface between the institutional and sector environments.

An element of trust was established because the participants were colleagues of the researcher's key informants. Further, by providing the participants with the details of the Institutional Interviewees, the Sector Interviewees were able to note that the study was being appropriately pursued and had already involved the key individuals in Scottish universities. The Sector Interview stage only included four participants because others who could validly have been included had already been interviewed

in either the Institutional Interview or Head of Department Interview stage. Annex C sets out the name, role and institution of the Sector Interviewees.

4.9 Data Collection Procedure

As stated, there were three data gathering stages: Institutional Interviews; Head of Department Interviews; and Sector Interviews. The following section details the data gathering procedure adopted in each of these stages. Subsequent sections will provide details of data analysis methods (section 4.10) and limitations (section 4.11) relating to the study.

Each Institutional Interviewee received a letter (see Annex F) outlining the aims of the research, the processes to be used, and the level of co-operation and participation sought. Institutional Interviewees were assured of confidentiality in terms of not identifying illustrative comments in the thesis. The researcher considered that this was likely to encourage participation (Creswell, 1998). The letter included details of the researcher's supervisor and of key institutional supporters from the researcher's own institution i.e. the Deputy Principal responsible for learning and teaching and the Secretary to the University. It was hoped that the inclusion of the supervisor and institutional supporter details would ease any concerns about the integrity of the study or the researcher. Staff from all thirteen Scottish universities agreed to participate.

As well as establishing the co-operation of institutions, this initial approach also served to provide the researcher with the opportunity to make contact, and begin to develop a rapport with, for example, the Senior Officer responsible for learning and teaching in each university. This was a vital element in the research process as in some cases the initial contact person acted as a key informant in directing the researcher to another potential interviewee (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988).

The letter did not directly seek participation but rather asked to briefly discuss the possibility of participation. In most universities the researcher's proposal to have an initial meeting was accepted and was then followed by agreement to participate.

However, in some universities correspondents immediately agreed to participate, foregoing the initial meeting.

With participation agreed, the next stage was to construct appropriate documentation that would indicate to the Institutional Interviewees the level of structure sought in the interviews. As set out at the beginning of this Chapter, Proposition Two considers that the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review would be similar across the sector even though the thirteen Scottish universities were culturally distinct. Prior to considering this, it would be necessary to make an assessment as to whether the institutions were culturally distinct. This was tackled by using an approach adopted in research undertaken by McNay (1995), where members of a university Senior Management Team were invited to distribute ten points across four definitions to reflect the cultural balance of their institution. The current study adopted both the ten point spread mechanism and the clear definition of cultures of Collegium, Bureaucracy, Corporation, and Enterprise set out by McNay.

The aim was not to define the cultures of each university but rather to establish that, according to the perception of the Institutional Interviewees, the institutions were culturally distinct. Providing the Institutional Interviewees with the definitions in the documentation and asking them to complete the ten-point spread prior to the meeting allowed the interview to focus on the primary research propositions regarding the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review rather than become sidetracked into a discussion on university culture. Additionally, this exercise also served the purpose of inviting Institutional Interviewees to consider the nature of their university and how the various cultures defined in the documentation existed and interacted within their organisation.

Given that the research design adopted semi-structured interviews as the method of data gathering, the pre-interview documentation also included four broad questions designed to invite the interviewee into a discussion on the operation and influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review. Preceding these questions, the Institutional Interviewee was asked to consider the nature of the research/teaching balance within

their institution. This would aid the assessment of the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, in that it could provide a benchmark of the institutional focus regarding non-research matters. Further, it also encouraged Institutional Interviewees to consider this balance prior to discussing the operation and influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review, hopefully reminding them of any relevant points. The selection and order of the questions and their pre-interview communication to Institutional Interviewees was important given that the study recognised that the participants were the source of data. Accordingly, the documentation encouraged the Institutional Interviewees to consider the research focus prior to the interview and should have prepared them to discuss matters in detail rather than simply answer a series of questions without prior detailed consideration of the topic.

A pilot study of the questions was not undertaken owing to the fact that the comprehensive nature of the case study selection meant that any interviewees in the pilot phase would also be used in the bona fide research. However, the researcher's key informants, who were non-participants owing to their role in interviewee selection, were well versed in the subject matter and thus invited to aid the researcher in clarifying the wording and order of the questions (Stake, 1995). Annex G provides a copy of the documentation provided to Institutional Interviewees. The six questions included in this information covered the following areas:

1. Definition of institutional culture.
2. Institutional research/teaching focus and research/teaching promotion reality.
3. Reactions to pre-TQA external accountability e.g. CNAAC; CVCP Academic Audit.
4. Reactions to SHEFC TQA 1992-1998.
5. Reactions to the post-TQA period (1998-Current) e.g. QAA Subject Review.
6. Summary perspectives on benefits, detriments and influence of the TQA/QAA processes.

Prior to the interviews, publicly available university/SHEFC/QAA/HEQC documentation was consulted to gain possible insight into the institutional approach to the management of learning and teaching and how each university interacted with its departments regarding this matter. The documents could largely be consulted without the time constraints associated with other sources (e.g. interviewing). The documents were a source of data in their own right, not merely a substitute for obtaining data by other methods, and provided historical information that may not have been available from other sources and placed it in a relevant context (Merriam, 1988; Hakim, 1992; Miller, 1997). As such the information provided and the contextual background obtained were invaluable to this research. However, not all documents provided the researcher with the same level of insight and as such their respective value was assessed item by item. Indeed, the researcher was the instrument of research and used intuition to find documents and interpret the data contained in them (Merriam, 1988). The researcher recognised that contextual issues may have shaped document content and that the data contained in them may be incomplete regarding the requirements of this research (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1988). The researcher remained aware of the inherent limitations of the documents being consulted. Indeed, the value of the documents consulted remained at all times an important consideration for the researcher (Creswell, 1998).

As in the subsequent Head of Department Interviews and Sector Interviews stages, the Institutional Interviews stage used semi-structured interviews as the method of gathering data. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their likelihood to provide the research with the most useful information. The interviews had a sufficient level of structure to ensure that the interview did not stray from the focus of the research but were flexible enough to allow the interviewer to explore relevant avenues of interest that came to light during the interview (Creswell, 1998).

Although the guarantee of confidentiality, an outline of the focus of the research, and the background of the researcher were provided when the interviewees were initially approached regarding participation, these matters were reviewed with the interviewee immediately before the interview took place (Creswell, 1998).

The interviews were used to find out about each respondent's feelings, behaviour, and interpretation in relation to events that could not be observed or replicated owing to the largely historical focus of the research. Through this a valuable insight was gained into the changes that had taken place, adding to the understanding of the research and its issues (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). Throughout the interview process the researcher remained aware of the importance of research credibility issues and as such sought opportunities in the interview situation to politely and appropriately seek clarification of comments and ask questions to confirm interviewee involvement, knowledge and status (Merriam, 1988). Carefully worded, clear language questions were used to obtain various types of information. These included fact, opinion, emotional views, descriptions of experiences, and interpretations (Merriam, 1988). Each respondent had a unique personal experience and as such was not asked entirely the same questions but rather was interviewed based on a short-list (interview protocol) of issue-related questions that were used to focus on the research relevant issues that emerged during the interview (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998). The pre-interview documentation was used to indicate that the interview had a broadly focused agenda (Stake, 1995).

Interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, who were given the opportunity to stop or pause the recording at any time. The interviewees were digitally recorded onto Mini-Disc, which provided secure storage and near instantaneous retrieval. Where possible a location free from distractions was selected, in some cases this was in a neutral committee room, in others it was the interviewee's office with interruptions discouraged. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. This was felt to be an appropriate amount of time because it allowed the researcher to work through the interview protocol while still exploring other avenues of interest. Additionally, it was felt that a longer interview time might discourage busy, senior staff from participating. In each interview the researcher was at all times punctual, patient, respectful, and courteous. The researcher was aware that the interviewee was the source of information and as such endeavoured to be a listener not a speaker, although appropriate prompts to focus the interviewee on relevant aspects that emerged were used. In an effort to maintain eye contact, and a

rapprochement with the interviewee, the researcher memorised the questions in the interview protocol to minimise consulting accompanying notes (Creswell, 1998).

Given the researcher's current position within one of the participating universities, a strong pre-understanding existed regarding both the theoretical and political issues inherent in the research. This was invaluable given that judgments on the relevance of information, and whether it should be further explored during the interview, had to be made quickly (Yin, 1994). Indeed, the researcher had to be flexible to ensure that opportunities to add to the understanding of the study were taken, be this by reconsidering existing issues, by addressing new ones, or redefining issues and the focus of the study (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1988).

Multiple perspectives were sought out, including contradictory views, for even competing opinions that could not be resolved might add to the understanding of the study. The task of the researcher was to ensure that the interviewee was given enough freedom to accurately impart his or her perceptions, without being allowed to control the overall direction of the interview. An appropriate balance had to be struck. The researcher also attempted to put the interviewee at ease; desisted from using leading probes; and endeavoured to accurately record and interpret the comments made during the interview. General topical questions were used to gain necessary information about the case and specific issue questions were posed to gain further insight into its complexities (Stake, 1995). Although the research questions at the heart of the study formed the focus for the interviews, data obtained and impressions formed from the consultation of documentary evidence phase were used to provide a strong element of institution-specific questioning. At the end of each interview the participant was thanked. Participants were reminded that the interviews would be transcribed and that these would be returned to the interviewee for approval, and if appropriate, amendment.

Although the interviews were recorded the researcher also made intermittent notes identifying impressions obtained at points in the interview or noting key comments of the interviewee. Such notes were used when the recording was reviewed post-

interview. Post-interview the researcher prepared further written notes on the interview, highlighting key aspects and interpretations. In this endeavour, obtaining the meaning provided by the respondent was more important than capturing the exact words (Stake, 1995). The researcher refined his question focus in each subsequent interview based on the earlier experiences, the data gathered and the impressions informed. Indeed, early in the Institutional Interview stage key issues were raised by a participant during the course of the discussion with the researcher. Given the relevance of these points, the researcher included them in future interviews and also wrote to participants that had already been interviewed in order to gain perspectives across all thirteen Scottish universities.

Post-transcription, almost all participants, over an extended period, signed and returned their scripts. A small number of participants telephoned to clarify issues of confidentiality and duly consented. Further, a small number of interviewees supplemented their transcript with further points of clarification. No participants withdrew their transcripts.

As highlighted earlier, the second stage of the data gathering involved Head of Department Interviews. The first step was to gain consent from the Principal for the researcher to seek the participation of staff. Given that only one university was selected for this part of the data gathering, it was agreed that both the institution and the participants would remain anonymous. With consent from the Principal in place, the next stage was to write to potential participants. The researcher consulted non-confidential internal paperwork and also publicly available documentation to determine which current and former Heads of Departments had also acted as SHEFC Assessors or QAA Reviewers. Twelve potential participants were then written to and invited to participate (see Annex H).

Ten individuals agreed to participate and were forwarded a three-page bullet point summary (see Annex I) of the main findings from the Institutional Interviews and were asked to reflect on this in light of their own experience. Although some elements did not apply to the Head of Department Interviews it was felt that it would

be better to present the entire data summary rather than edit it and risk losing contextual links. The summary was constructed after analysis of the Institutional Interviewee data. The process of data analysis is detailed in the section 4.10.

The summary covered the following areas:

1. Institution culture; teaching/research balance; promotion reality.
2. Participation in sector consultations and as Reviewers/Assessors.
3. Approaches and reactions to external accountability.
4. Benefits, detriments and the influence of external accountability.
5. Summary/conclusion.

As in earlier stages, the researcher's key informants were asked to comment on the clarity of the wording in this document. Semi-structured interviews were then undertaken following the procedure used for the Institutional Interview stage.

As highlighted earlier, the third stage of data gathering involved Sector Interviews. The four participants were written to (see Annex J) inviting their participation. In addition to the letter of invitation, the potential participants were also provided with brief details of participants in the institutional interviewee phase to highlight that to-date the study had included the most appropriate people in the Scottish university sector. The Sector Interviewees were provided with the same summary given to Head of Department Interviewees. This was because the aim was, where appropriate, to triangulate the data obtained in the Institutional Interview phase and also to ensure that any supplementary data was also drawn from the same research focus and background understanding. Semi-structured interviews were then undertaken following the procedure used for the Institutional Interview stage. In line with the aim of using each interview to enhance the next one, the researcher incorporated perspectives from the Head of Department Interviews into the discussions with the Sector Interviewees as appropriate.

In all three interview stages, the researcher followed the four guidelines set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that indicate when a researcher should end the data collection phase. These are: when sources have been exhausted; when the categories chosen have been saturated to an extent that only small amounts of new information are added in comparison to the effort used to obtain the data; when regularities continue to emerge; and when the new information is not closely enough related to the issues and categories being studied and are not viable avenues in themselves.

4.10 Data Analysis

Before the data analysis phase was undertaken, practical matters, such as the benefits and detriments of using computers to aid the analysis of the interviews were considered. The use of computers in qualitative analysis has been seen as beneficial by some in that it can aid the storage and retrieval of data and help focus the research on key aspects of the data. However, a key disadvantage could be that the researcher might allow the computer to take over the analysis and as such an overall sense of the data collected may be lost (Creswell, 1998).

For this research, computers were used to aid the general storage of some data and to maintain notes on the progress made with analysis in terms of the construction of categories and the matching of data to them. However, given the varying strength, detail, and scope of individual opinions, software was not used to aid the analysis, as the researcher preferred to have the opportunity to maintain an overall sense of the data as categories were established and interpretations made. Even once the data analysis was complete and the thesis was being written, interviewee transcripts were routinely reviewed to ensure that perspectives were accurately reflected and that illustrative quotes and Case Study Examples were reported within the context they were provided.

The researcher undertook the transcription of the interviews. This took approximately ten hours per hour of interview. Although the process was time consuming, it provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain a detailed knowledge of each interview. This aided the researcher in identifying recurring

themes because the researcher was aware when and where a topic or similar comment had previously occurred. Although the researcher created summary notes after each interview to highlight possible themes and to inform future interviews, the researcher also endeavoured to transcribe each interview as soon as possible after the interview to ensure that themes were identified and utilised.

Data was continually interpreted to aid the process of appropriately focusing the gathering process and seeking out relevant information (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995). The researcher regarded the participants as informants as well as respondents and used each interview to enhance the next one (Hakim, 1992). This meant that although detailed analysis primarily occurred at the end of each of the three stages of data gathering (Institutional Interviews; Head of Department Interviews; Sector Interviews) such analysis was not entirely distinct, for continual evaluation of data was undertaken as the study progressed (Merriam, 1988).

In analysing the data, the researcher looked at emerging patterns from the personal accounts of attitudes and experiences (Hakim, 1992). In doing so, this process of understanding endeavoured to construct a holistic picture of each case in its natural setting (Creswell, 1998). However, the researcher also remained aware of the value of direct interpretation, which was utilised appropriately.

Undertaking the intensive analysis phase effectively meant utilising a method specifically designed for this research project given that there was not a clear consensus regarding data analysis in qualitative studies (Creswell, 1998). As such a general approach was followed with procedural definition applied as appropriate to the study. At the end of each information gathering stage (i.e. after the completion of Institutional Interviews; Head of Department Interviews; and Sector Interviews) the data collected was brought together and read intensively to gain an overall sense of what had been gathered. As highlighted, notes on findings, impressions and categories were made as an aid to sorting the data and progressing its analysis. Following the creation of a description of the data, it was classified into categories, and then interpreted. During the above process the researcher endeavoured to ensure

that the initial research questions and propositions remained in focus (Stake, 1995; Merriam 1988; Creswell, 1998). Given that the qualitative approach acknowledges that multiple realities exist, such subjectivity requires that the data is interpreted as opposed to measured (Merriam, 1988). Accordingly, the researcher sought to gain an accurate, though inevitably limited understanding of a case, by deconstructing the impressions formed and giving meaning to parts relevant to the research (Stake, 1995).

As indicated above, the data analysis utilised various approaches. Direct interpretation was used when it was appropriate to draw upon a single instance for meanings; essentially taking data apart and putting it together in a more meaningful manner. Categorical aggregation was used when it was possible to bring together a collection of data aspects to highlight issue-relevant meanings. Patterns were identified by direct interpretation or by coding and then assessing frequencies, resulting in categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998). Corresponding patterns were also identified.

The key analytical process was that of establishing relevant categories into which data could be compartmentalised. The focus of the research and the data obtained effectively determined the number of categories defined (Merriam, 1988). The categories were defined following the guidelines set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Categories were identified when the researcher felt that the occurrence was an indication that it may be important to the study. This may be owing to the frequency with which a topic appeared in the raw data; the credibility an aspect may add to the study; its uniqueness; or simply that it was a relevant category that had not previously been identified (Merriam, 1988). Convergent and divergent categories and themes were developed and data items were collated into these through a process of reading and consideration, and evidence was sought from multiple sources to support emerging perspectives (Creswell, 1998; Merriam 1988). Not all the collected information was used. The process of narrowing down data was aided by creating codes to identify the content of text segments (Creswell, 1998).

Narrative extracts from the collected data were used to allow the reader an opportunity to gain an experiential understanding of the cases (Stake, 1995). The reader could accordingly be assisted in making naturalistic generalisations by taking the extracts, together with the researcher's descriptions and assertions, and considering them as vicarious experience and adding them to their existing knowledge to modify their existing generalisations (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998).

Detailed Case Study Examples also aided this. These were provided to highlight selected themes. It was necessary to provide sufficient detail to allow the relevant points to be presented within an appropriate context. The level of detail might mean that elements overlapped or indeed that minority views were presented. This does not weaken the narrative of the thesis; rather it provides the reader with a greater opportunity for insight into the research data.

Case Study Examples were provided regarding the Institutional Interviews and the Head of Department Interviews. They were not provided regarding the Sector Interviews because the necessity to provide sufficient detail might inadvertently lead to a breach of confidentiality given the justifiably small number of participants in that phase of data gathering. However, to compensate for the lack of Case Study Examples, detailed quotes were used as often as possible, as these might provide the reader with additional information and insight.

Appropriately, qualitative language was used to present the results of this qualitative study. This was in tune with the presentational approach of other studies (e.g. Drennan, 2000; Henkel, 2000).

4.11 Limitations

There are recognised limitations in terms of both the data gathering and its analysis regarding the use of a qualitative case study approach. Unchecked, these could have had a detrimental affect on the credibility of the research. In utilising purposeful sampling, the study selected cases that offered the greatest potential for adding to the understanding of the research focus. Indeed, related studies (Henkel, 2000; Drennan,

2000; Morley 2003) have also been selective in identifying research participants. However, given that humans are fallible and have biases there exists the possibility that the choices made could have been flawed. Indeed, the issues of fallibility and bias are also relevant to choices made in data gathering and interpreting information (Merriam, 1988). Also, given the researcher's close contact with participants and his interpretation of the data collected, the final report ultimately offers a personal view (Stake, 1995).

Regarding the Institutional Interview phase of the triangulated study, the sampling was comprehensive in that each of the Scottish universities was included in the process, as such the selection of cases did not pose a problem regarding fallibility or bias. The choice of a single university for the Head of Department Interview stage minimised the potential for third-party bias to influence the study because it ensured that the selection of appropriate participants remained with the researcher. Indeed, in all three data gathering stages (Institutional Interviews, Head of Department Interviews, Sector Interviews), bias in the selection of participants was minimised by ensuring that the process was driven by criteria focusing on experience, rather than personal or key informant preference.

At each interview stage only a small number of participants were involved. However, these were the individuals who had the most appropriate experience of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review in either a departmental, institutional, or sector-wide context and thus represented those most likely to enhance the research. Selecting additional participants that were less suitable would not have benefited the quality of data gathered.

Caution has been advised when selecting cases that the interviewer has a personal link with (Stake, 1995; Creswell 1998). However, the inclusion of the researcher's own university was essential at the Institutional Interview stage given that a comprehensive sample was chosen. Also, regarding the Head of Department Interview stage, the selection of an institution that the researcher had links with ensured that an element of trust existed between the researcher and the interviewees

and this served to aid the gathering of honest and open perceptions from the interviewees. A positive aspect of such interactions was that the interviewees were aware of the issues that the researcher wished to investigate and recognised the importance that the study held for him. As such they endeavoured to be as responsive as possible. Also, they were less likely to be cautious about the interviewer's guarantee of confidentiality given the researcher's links with their institution and that they also shared a similar knowledge base. The researcher did, however, remain alert to any potential difficulties caused by using an institution which he had links with (Creswell, 1998).

With regard to the gathering and analysis of data, the researcher endeavoured to remain focused on the aims of the research and be aware of possible ways to enhance the study, be this by introducing new sources and themes or discarding existing ones. Also, the researcher was appropriately versed in both the focus of the study and the contextual issues surrounding it and this reduced the possibility of human error owing to a lack of knowledge. Bias is also acknowledged as a limitation but by being aware of its influence, the researcher endeavoured to approach both the data gathering and analysis in a manner that would benefit the study and reduce the influence of such views. Also, the researcher's pre-understanding was detailed earlier in this chapter (section 4.6) and as such alerts the reader to any potential biases.

The dangers of bias and human fallibility also existed regarding interviewees. For example, interviewees may have had good or bad TQA/Subject Review gradings, and these could potentially influence the data gathered. Accordingly, the researcher endeavoured to account for these matters and extract worthwhile data (Merriam, 1988). The key safeguard was that the researcher remained aware that such factors, unchecked, could limit the credibility of the research. It was important when obtaining data from interviewees on their perceptions of the behaviour of their organisations that the respondents could distinguish between their own views and those of the institution (Hakim, 1992). To minimise bias, the following key safeguards were imposed: the perspectives of participants had to be expressed; the

researcher remained aware of his psychological and emotional states to ensure critical subjectivity during the process; and reciprocity between researcher and respondent was established to ensure trust and mutuality (Creswell, 1998). Further, as highlighted by Morley (2003), "*as performativity is such a central feature of presenting quality*" (p.xi) care had to be taken in assessing the integrity of data.

The researcher was aware that interview data essentially contained the perceptions of the interviewee and as such the data might be distorted, so where possible the researcher compared accounts with others obtained (Merriam, 1988). The researcher was also aware that the interviewees often were skilled in handling academic discussions and interacting with interviewers (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). The researcher endeavoured not to allow the academic or social skills of the interviewee to distract him from the focus of the research or to be unduly influenced by single sources. The researcher minimised the influence of human fallibility during the interview by approaching the interactions in a manner that was sensitive, respectful and non-judgmental regarding the views of the interviewee (Merriam, 1988).

The researcher was aware that the construction of the bullet-point summary of Institutional Interview data, provided as background to Head of Department Interviewees and Sector Interviewees, was open to both researcher bias and fallibility. However, the researcher had attained a thorough grounding in both the research issues and the responses emerging to them from the Institutional Interviewees and as such was well placed to construct the summary while minimising the effect of his own biases and the possibility of misinterpreting the issues and data.

The researcher was also aware of other possible limitations that might affect the credibility of the research. For example, the data obtained during an interview might be inaccurate if the interviewee was seeking to impress the interviewer or achieve his acceptance (Dingwall, 1997). Also, double questions, with a single inquiry seeking answers on two matters, and leading questions, with the interviewee encouraged to respond in a certain way, were avoided (Merriam, 1988). The researcher was aware

that the data obtained in an interview was a mix of reality and representation and as such was merely a version of an experience of the situation being discussed (Dingwall, 1997).

Another limitation was that the data gathering could be detrimentally affected by the historical nature of elements of the research focus. Given that the period covered 1992-2002, some recollections may not be entirely accurate. However, the participants selected had a detailed experience of these issues and as such were not asked to recall a one-off experience but rather they were invited to express their perspectives across the 1992-2002 period, with examples from relevant points. Where interviewees highlighted that they were unsure of matters, such as time-scales or details, this was noted by the researcher when analysing the data. It was hoped that providing participants with documentation regarding the research in advance of the meeting would afford an opportunity for interviewees to reflect upon their experience prior to the interview and possibly aid their recollection of events.

A factor that ensured that the data was accurately interpreted and faithfully reported was the professional relationship that the researcher had with the interviewees. It was evident that post-publication, the subject matter of the thesis would likely lead research participants to consider its findings. Further, it was apparent that the researcher and the institutional interviewees would continue to regularly meet in fora such as the Teaching Quality Forum. This emphasised the importance of correctly analysing, interpreting and reporting the views of participants. The researcher was aware of his duty to faithfully report the research data and remained focused on not allowing personal opinion to adversely affect this.

4.12 Summary

The research focus that underpins this study was borne from the consideration of the context of the relationship between the university sector and Government higher education policy regarding the external accountability of learning and teaching. This drew upon both the general cultural impact that new legislation has had on universities and the specific development and operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review as means of providing external accountability of learning and

teaching. Research propositions were defined following a detailed analysis of the current literature regarding the accountability of universities, in particular the quality assurance of learning and teaching provision, and the cultural and managerial structure of institutions.

The review of the research context and the current literature also established the relevance for the study of the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. It underlined that the study would contribute both to the current academic debate on the external accountability of universities regarding quality and also current and future higher education policy.

With the research focus established and the propositions defined, it was necessary to consider the philosophical, methodological, and research design approaches that would aid the consideration of the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision. This resulted in the adoption of a qualitative case study approach that sought to gather the perspectives of staff with appropriate experience of these external processes. To aid the validity of the study, data from three stages of information gathering (Institutional Interviews; Head of Department Interviews; and Sector Interviews) would be triangulated. A consideration of the value of triangulation and limitations of sampling aided the formulation of a research design that purposefully selected cases and interviewees. The potential influence of the pre-understanding of the researcher was acknowledged.

The chapter then defined and justified the procedure used for undertaking the data gathering and interview analysis. Details of the rationale behind, and construction of, documentation sent to interviewees was discussed, as was the undertaking of semi-structured interviews. The importance of continual analysis of the data to aid future interviewees was highlighted, as was the value of intensive analysis utilising both categorical aggregation and direct interpretation to identify themes and relevant

points in relation to the influence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review on the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.

Limitations of the research methodology and design, such as the selection of case studies and interviewees, and the possibilities for bias on both the part of the researcher and the interviewee, were acknowledged. Measures taken to minimise the affects of these, such as the criteria focused selection of participants, were clarified.

Having established and justified the rationale and procedures for case and participant selection, data gathering, and data analysis, the next stage is to present the results. Chapter Five presents a summary of the data gathered from the Institutional Interviews.

Chapter Five

Institutional Interviews

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses how the data gathered from the Institutional Interviews applies to the three propositions that underpin this research. Each proposition is considered in turn. As noted in Chapter Five, in line with the approach taken by related studies (Henkel, 2000; Drennan, 2000, Morley 2003) the discussion of the research data follows a narrative rather than statistical format and uses appropriate qualitative descriptors. The narrative is representative of the research data; identifying and discussing broad themes but also detailing and illustrating, through the use of quotes, constituent elements. Further, six thematic Case Study Examples provide additional insight to key points. Each Case Study Example is drawn from a separate institution. Three are drawn from post-1992 universities and three from pre-1992 universities. However, to ensure confidentiality the pre/post origin of Case Study Examples is not individually provided.

The Institutional Interviews represent the core of the data gathered in this study. The data included perceptions of the influence on departments as well as institutions. As highlighted earlier, Institutional Interviewees were well placed to comment on the influence on departments given that many had been Head of Department and/or SHEFC Lead Assessors or Assessors. Further, by the very nature of their institutional role, all were closely involved in the university-department learning and teaching relationship. Head of Department Interviews and Sector Interviews subsequently were undertaken to supplement and, where possible, triangulate this data. The data gathered from these interviews is discussed in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven respectively.

Although SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review are viewed by this thesis as an external accountability continuum operating from 1992 to 2002, the individual processes are distinguished where appropriate. Where relevant, a distinction is

drawn between the views of Institutional Interviewees from pre-1992 and post-1992 universities.

To aid the reader in his or her assessment of the data, where illustrative quotes are provided, *pre* or *post* is used to identify the type of university that the interviewee belonged to. Again, in an effort to ensure cross-sector balance in the selection of the Case Study Examples, three were chosen from pre-1992 universities and three from post-1992 universities.

5.2 The Catalytic Influence of TQA and Subject Review

The data gathered from the Institutional Interviews supports the first proposition made in this thesis, that:

The implementation and operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities has had a positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

The implementation and operation of such external accountability, and the subsequent importance of appropriate performance in the assessments, increased existing sector, institutional and departmental awareness of the need to demonstrate the assurance of the quality of learning and teaching provision. Although this enhanced approach may have initially been brought about by a desire to obtain good results, a longer term, deeper, influence was produced as the focus on learning and teaching and associated quality assurance issues increased.

5.2.1 The Importance of Performance in TQA and Subject Review

A key factor in the enhancement of the focus on a long-term basis was the importance institutions and departments attached to performing well in external assessments. This may be owed to a combination of a number of reasons. Although

an underlying factor in focusing performance may have been that such external reviews were either directly or closely related to the income provider SHEFC, interviews highlighted other factors as being the principal drivers in seeking to perform well.

Two key factors were commonly highlighted; these being the professional approach of academic staff and the competitive nature of assessment, be this associated with inter-institution, intra-institution or inter-cognate area competition. In some cases a department “gelled” (*post*) as they focused on the common aim of illustrating the quality of their provision. In others, departments wanted to be viewed as performing strongly: “*I jolly well wouldn’t have wanted to get a worse score than [X]...*” (*pre*). Over time, the increasing importance of university league tables published in the national press, underlined the need for appropriate performance.

5.2.2 Varying Levels of Initial Focus

TQA results indicated that several institutions performed consistently well throughout the 1992-2002 period. Although their approach to TQA evolved, this was owed to experience of the process rather than the need for remedial action. However, for a small number of universities, to varying degrees, an initial shortfall in focus and related poor results, led to a more immediate review of preparatory practices and a heightened awareness of the importance of appropriate focus.

The importance of performance was not immediately evident to all institutions and departments. At the outset of TQA, most institutions, and a small number of these in particular, were less focused than, in hindsight, they would have preferred. There are a number of potential reasons for this, such as a failure to realise the importance that the results would have; a lack of acceptance in some pre-1992 universities of the principle of external accountability or of the appropriateness of the TQA process; or a misconception in some post-1992 universities as to the nature of the TQA process. However, the predominant reason was confidence that current provision and quality assurance practices would be readily evidenced as being of a high standard.

It was evident that the CNAA experience of the post-1992 universities, led to institutions being comfortable with the mechanisms and language of external accountability and confident that the quality of provision had already been evidenced and would be repeated in TQA. It was also evident that the pre-1992 universities were similarly confident. A long history, in some cases centuries, of provision meant that universities had judged the quality of provision by their own criteria, such as the quality of graduates, as illustrated by their strong employability.

Unlike the post-1992 universities, the pre-1992 universities had had little experience of external accountability, other than to external examiners and professional and statutory bodies, and latterly, the CVCP Academic Audit undertaken at an institutional level. Regarding Academic Audit, only a small number of Scottish universities had experienced the process at the inception of TQA, so for most pre-1992 universities the extent of the external experience at that point in time was the Audit related documentation and the earlier Academic Standards guidance disseminated by CVCP.

Pre-1992 university Institutional Interviewees had varying views on the impact of the pre-TQA CVCP Academic Audit and preceding CVCP Academic Standards guidance. However, it was evident that the CVCP endeavours had a considerably less consistent impact on pre-1992 universities than the CNAA had on post-1992 universities. Although some interviewees highlighted the positive impact of Academic Audit, the general view of the CVCP endeavours is summed-up by the following comments *“for most of the University I should think that outside accountability wasn't really something they thought about until [TQA]”* (pre). Again, it should be underlined that although the Academic Standards guidance had long been available, the Academic Audit programme was in its infancy at this point in time and only a small number of institutions were visited prior to TQA.

Across the sector, this limited focus was apparent in a number of ways when TQA was introduced. The nomination of peer reviewers is one example. A small number were either indifferent to, or took a conscious decision against, nominating

reviewers, be this as an indication of their objection to the TQA process or a feeling that this form of participation would not be a beneficial endeavour. Further, although the majority of institutions encouraged academic staff to become peer reviewers, this was generally of a mild nature. While this may have indicated a lack of institutional focus and management of the process, it should be noted that the culture of academic freedom meant that the final participation decision was essentially that of the individual academic.

Even in institutions that did feel that they were focused on TQA from the outset, there was often limited or even a lack of preparatory support for departments. Although several institutional structures, as a matter of course, granted significant autonomy to departments, the lack of co-ordination was evident in a variety of institutions, including those with a stronger central steer. Accordingly, institutional culture is not a clear indicator of the preparatory support that would or would not be provided.

Indeed, the most structured preparatory support for departments came from a pre-1992 university with a strong collegial tradition, when it might be expected that CNNA experience would have meant that a post-1992 university would have operated the most centralised approach. There were universities that did have a high level of focus from an early stage but chose to operate a less formal approach. The key point is that, regardless of whether or not the centre of the university played a strong role, some universities more than others took a conscious decision as to how TQA should be approached.

A vital element in creating an appropriate level of focus was the role played in universities by individuals in key positions intent on highlighting, to varying degrees of success, the necessity of increased awareness and action. For example, one Senate was advised that although there might be justified scepticism or resentment of the review of learning and teaching, external accountability would not be short-term; could not be escaped; and could provide benefits. Accordingly, it was emphasised that the university "*should not adopt a bunker mentality*" (pre).

It seemed that the likely long-term impact of TQA on universities was generally underestimated and there was an according lack of focus on addressing the task. Indeed, although awareness and focus grew, even towards the end of the TQA cycle in some institutions there was sometimes a lack of credence given to departmental TQA endeavours, as illustrated by the following comment: *"I always remember, it rankles still, that when [we had an outstanding result] it wasn't even mentioned in the Faculty meeting. That was an oversight to be fair, but it's a symptomatic oversight all the same"* (pre).

5.2.3 The Development of Awareness and Focus

Over the period of operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review the institutional focus on external review developments increased. Although the majority of institutions were actively involved in the discussions leading up to TQA, the sector as a whole in 2003 has an almost uniformly intense focus on external developments that was considerably less evident in the early 1990s.

However, viewing the sector as a whole, it took some time before this level of awareness was achieved. In various institutions the impact of TQA was often only felt following worrying TQA results or reports. For example, in a university that prided itself on being a good teaching institution, the *"comfort zone"* (pre) began to diminish when TQA reports criticised classic, traditional teaching methods as being stale and unimaginative. The indication that teaching *"was dull and worthy but not very exciting, not very innovative"* (pre) was disturbing.

In one pre-1992 university, confidence in provision had led to a lack of focus on TQA, *"they'd assumed that what they were doing by its very nature was excellent. So why did they need a TQA to tell them that? They got an awful shock to find out that wasn't so"* (pre). Following the disappointing result a considerably more focused and serious approach was cultivated with a necessary *"major culture shift"* (pre) brought about by communication, explanation and motivation. Poor results acted as a catalyst for change in universities that had been less focused on the process than others. Case Study Example 5.1 illustrates the reaction to a disappointing result.

Other examples from pre-1992 universities, included highlighting that underperformance in TQA “needled” (pre) departments into reviewing and enhancing their practices, even where results were felt to be unfair, or meant that peer reviewers were more actively sought, a failure in doing so earlier having been viewed as detrimental to results.

Case Study Example 5.1

Institutional Reaction to Disappointing Results

- The following comments apply to early in the 1992-2002 period: *“TQA took us a bit by shock...At that time institutional policy was not to nominate assessors. It was deemed a waste of time. There was no encouragement or pressure to volunteer”*. Preparation for TQA *“was very much a departmental responsibility”*.
- Disappointing results led *“to a feeling that our complacency had been shattered. As a result of that there was a fairly early decision to take the process more seriously”*. A quick response led to a Quality Unit (generic term) being established and a senior officer being given a remit to support quality assurance. There was support for departments scheduled to be externally assessed and for those undertaking post-review actions.
- In terms of preparation for TQA: *“The reaction was that the institution started to take it more seriously from all angles. Firstly, supporting departments by explaining what it was actually about. Secondly, supervising the department, helping them with Self-Evaluations. Thirdly, helping them prepare for visits. Fourthly, actually monitoring what was going on during visits”*.
- Regarding the nomination of peer reviewers: *“This changed immediately. The policy was that nominations were expected. Internally they were approved. We saw them very much as ambassadors for the University. There was pressure to appoint significant people whom we felt would do a good job”*.
- Although the increased support for departments was initially *“fire fighting to try to ensure that we were not getting a bad result through lack of preparation or attention”*, there was a clear aim *“to drive implementation of our internal procedures more firmly, in particular annual monitoring”*. Post-review, *“comments and reports on weaknesses, tended to be translated into internal policy and briefing and guidance for the next year”*. In one example, a reviewer’s comment led to a situation whereby *“within a month there was a procedure and an exemplar translating questions raised into internal policy”*.
- With the new approach in place, *“quickly we got the results improved”*. The institutional focus and importance of performance was such that a positive grade produced *“a feel good factor”*. Departments were anxious to perform well given that *“the institution saw the results as a measure of the department. It was a badge they wore”*.
- There were a number of benefits: *“As well as an improvement in results I think we got better at learning within the organisation, at implementing change. We got better at implementing our own policy and procedures”*. Results brought credibility to an approach that was *“prepared to offer support rather than say ‘do it’*. Support and encouragement continues to be provided as the approach evolves to include a greater focus on enhancement.

Disappointing results also proved to be a driver for change in several post-1992 universities. In one institution the initial view that CNAAs would stand the university in good stead was replaced by a “*crisis of confidence*” (post) following early TQA results. An increased focus on performance followed.

Just as some institutions were spurred into action after poor results, Institutional Interviewees from several universities that had consistently performed well also indicated that a more focused or supportive approach could have led to even better results: “...[good results]...*should have been a damn site better...and would have I’m sure had there actually been more guidance and advice, and even more so had people just taken it more seriously*” (pre).

Even though institutions considered their learning and teaching provision and practices to be of a high standard, the view that external review raised the importance of teaching, regarding both institutions and departments, was strongly evident across the sector. Further, the focus on quality assurance issues was generally stronger and more apparent. For example, in a post-1992 university, the reality that any member of staff could have their teaching assessed effectively ended the assumption, borne from staff experience of the CNAAs validation, that “*they’ll field the A team and it’s not going to impact on us*” (post). Regarding quality assurance, “...*the culture of everybody taking it seriously has been changed, if I can repeat again, through the QAA, through the TQA. Probably even though we had it, it impacted on more people, they became more aware of it*” (post).

5.2.4 The Influence of Institutional and Departmental Leadership

As highlighted above, in institutions where appropriate focus was lacking or approaches required improvement, remedial actions were taken. However, even in institutions that were performing well in external assessment, efforts were made to raise the institutional and departmental awareness and focus. Leadership was identified as a key factor in both remedial and developmental action.

In several universities the support of senior officers became more evident. During the early TQA period, central leadership was particularly apparent in pre-1992 universities, perhaps because the CNAAs experience of the post-1992 universities meant that they required less immediate change.

However, in some pre-1992 and post-1992 universities required leadership was lacking. The collegial culture of one pre-1992 university meant that the centre was not particularly powerful and accordingly, for external review, there was *“no sense of central direction or leadership” (pre)*. Whilst other universities were putting systems in place to ensure that the best possible results were achieved, it was considered that this institution was *“really quite slow to learn to play the game” (pre)*.

The necessity of strong institutional support in underlining the importance of taking external review seriously is illustrated by an institutional interviewee from a different pre-1992 university, commenting that the commitment of the Principal was *“absolutely key because it had been felt that, rightly or wrongly, that commitment had not been there...It’s difficult enough if you feel you haven’t got the hearts and minds of departments but if you don’t feel that you’re being backed-up then you might as well give up” (pre)*.

Leadership at departmental level was evident in both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, with Heads of Departments or departmental Directors of Teaching (generic title) often compensating for any initial shortfall in central university support or guidance by driving departmental preparations. Often Heads of Departments decided to become peer reviewers despite a lack of institutional encouragement.

The culture and operation of individual universities varied and this influenced management approaches. However, it was widely evident that a key role was often played by the Head of Department, who identified with departmental *“pride and ownership” (pre)* in seeking to perform well in the face of both external review and

inter-university competition. Accordingly, in many institutions, from across the sector, preparations were *“organised from the bottom up rather than from the top down” (pre)*. In several institutions, informal networks developed between departments and faculties with the aim of learning from experience and of preparing for future assessment. These involved those that were about to be assessed and those with experience of the process, either through assessment or as peer reviewers.

However, not all departments were similarly focused. Thus, as the importance of performing well became clear to institutions, in some cases, across the sector, the centre of the university felt it necessary to exercise pressure to ensure that departments were sufficiently focused in their preparations. Accordingly, pressure could come from faculty or institutional senior officers, appropriately empowered committees, or key administrators who would *“wield a Dean, who would go and knock heads together to ensure that things were done” (pre)*. It was emphasised that this action was rare and did not indicate that teaching or quality assurance was weak but rather that there was either resistance from some departments to having to justify their actions externally or a lack of focus regarding appropriate preparation.

University leadership was primarily evident in the preparation for SHEFC/QAA assessments but latterly it came more to the fore in terms of revising university quality assurance processes. In one pre-1992 university, having previously failed to convince Senate to implement a programme of regular internal review, experience of external review meant that support was garnered from the Principal and other senior officers and the process was subsequently adopted. However, it was apparent that experience of external review made Senate more willing to be convinced. This institutional support continued when in a small number of cases departments did not take the internal process seriously. Deans were used to underline the necessity of appropriate participation and *“in at least one case I had to discuss it with the Principal, and I’m not quite sure what he did, but it worked” (pre)*.

5.2.5 The Beneficial Influence of Departmental Preparation and Reflection

In order to prepare for external review, departments reflected upon their practices. Although in some cases these measures may have initially been with the aim of demonstrating the depth and relevance of their approach to the assurance of learning and teaching provision, and thus ensuring a good performance in the external assessment, it was widely evident that the process of reflection, together with the experience of being assessed, led to longer term changes that did not revert to their pre-assessment position.

The key, commonly identified and earlier highlighted, benefit was that external review brought a renewed focus to learning and teaching. This is not to suggest that institutions and departments did not already have a genuine interest in learning and teaching and the development of their students. Indeed, the existing commitment of institutions, and in particular staff, to teaching was almost universally emphasised. Rather, it is evident that the increased focus placed on teaching and its quality assurance by external review, together with the preparatory processes undergone by departments and institutions and the desire to perform well, led to an enhancement of the existing focus.

One interviewee described two key beneficial elements in the external review process. Firstly, preparatory self-assessment reflection was such that *“you hold a mirror up to yourself”* (pre) while, secondly, the subsequent external review element *“holds a mirror up to you”* (pre). Although interviewees had varying experiences of the value of these separate elements and there were undoubted difficulties, particularly in the operation of the external reviews, taking the sector as a whole it was clearly evident that this dual process of self-assessment and peer-review ensured that addressing learning and teaching issues gained and, largely retained, a greater priority.

Although there was a strong retrospective element to external review, it was generally acknowledged that, to varying degrees, that *“you have to look at what you do in order to develop it...you need that to move forward”* (post). Further, several

interviewees highlighted that the preparation that flowed from a desire to perform well was “*a hell of a good teambuilding exercise*” (*post*). Although there were diverging views regarding the operation of specific systems and the experience of individual reviews, it was generally evident that a value of actual external review was that it could bring a different perspective, and, according to one interviewee, could “*throw up things that perhaps the University has taken for granted because you are so rooted in your own systems sometimes, you can become too accepting*” (*pre*).

It was widely recognised that the increased focus on teaching and its quality assurance brought with it a number of other identifiable benefits, such as a greater propensity for staff to actively review the aims of courses and the methods employed to achieve them. Generally practices and strategies were reviewed and, where necessary, were clarified, formalised and documented. A common action was for institutions and departments to tune existing practices, and make implicit, often ad hoc, mechanisms, explicit and routine. Although there were varying and often diverging views on the direct impact that this had on actual teaching, it was clearly evident across the sector that associated quality assurance “*housekeeping*” (*pre*) was placed higher on the agenda.

There was also clear evidence of a more focused approach to course and student-orientated documentation. For example, although there had been good practice, standards throughout one institution rose to a consistently high quality, becoming “*terrifically better*” (*pre*). There was also evidence of a more positive approach to acting upon student opinion, even where this was already held in high regard. Further, the filtering back from home institution peer reviewers of reassurance that existing internal provision was strong or could benefit from the good practice of others was widely identified as being beneficial.

5.2.6 The Beneficial Influence of Institutional Preparation and Reflection

The importance of performing well in external assessments led institutions to consider and adopt mechanisms to aid preparations for external review such as the

formulation of self-assessment documentation. Developing such approaches often subsequently influenced the broader approach to quality assurance and in particular the balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership.

5.2.6.1 The Evolution of Institutional Approaches to Review Preparation

Although preparatory support for departments varied amongst institutions, across the sector universities developed or adapted processes that allowed institutions and their constituent departments to satisfy external accountability in a manner appropriate to the university's culture and structure. Coming within the remit of established committees and posts, the review of self-assessment documentation was generally dealt with by the existing university apparatus. However, formal and informal practices often developed to ensure that this and other aspects of external review preparation were appropriately addressed. Often such mechanisms were intended to facilitate institutional understanding of the process and digestion of review outcomes.

The importance of the link between the centre of the university and departments was widely highlighted. Across the sector, preparation for external review was largely left to departments, and in several pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, at least initially, there was "*little or no guidance*" (*post*) given. As highlighted earlier, some interviewees felt that support from the centre could have led to an improvement on results, even in universities that had performed strongly. However, in others there was a stronger central influence, and in a small number of pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, internal reviews became closely linked to preparation for external assessment. Further, examples of cultivating experience of the process included the use of earlier self-assessment documents as exemplars and the use of briefing sessions utilising those that had been reviewed or had acted as peer reviewers.

The development of an appropriate department-university balance is illustrated by perceptions of the interaction regarding the preparation of self-assessment documentation for external reviews. For example, in one university, a largely ineffective, managerially top-heavy, review of draft self-assessments by "*a gathering of the great and the good*" (*pre*) was replaced, after a number of years, by a more

successful approach of working in informal smaller faculty-level groups and utilising those with experience as peer reviewers. However, across the sector, obtaining the correct balance in such reviews remained a difficult task. Case Study Example 5.2 illustrates that even a largely productive institution-department interface could prove to be problematic.

Case Study Example 5.2

Preparation for External Review and the Institution-Department Relationship

- At the beginning of the 1992-2002 period departmental external review submissions: *“pretty much were developed in the departments and went out the door with a rubber stamp”*.
- Poor results led to a change of approach: *“It became clear from the senior management’s perspective that it had to be managed through, that we weren’t going to submit...without there having been a fair amount of development work to present the documentation and to make sure that other things were going on in the background within [departments].”*
- The first stage of evolution saw a greater role for a Quality Unit (generic term): *“...we actually managed the development of the self-assessments and its final approval. That involved many meetings round the table, where we had people from all the different subject areas involved...We evolved a process and an understanding of what we thought TQA was about and then we had an approval process whereby people brought drafts to the table, where there would be six or seven people from various parts of the University commenting. We would act as first reader to earlier drafts. We would support departments to a point where we felt that we had something we wanted to share with a bigger group.”*
- In a further evolutionary stage: *“[the Quality Unit] in some ways almost shifted mode and became secretary and started to support the centre. So [a senior officer], for example, chaired a whole series of these big meetings where we went through drafts and people went away and rewrote them and came back. Almost inevitably, and certainly in the latter years of TQA, that ended up in a stand off between the department and the centre...Regardless of how much of it we could agree on, there was always a 10% which everybody was willing to go to the wall for, whether it merited it or not. That was really destructive because all of the positive work that was going on before then became a stand off. Inevitably it became a stand off in the week before the deadline, and so pressure of time to get the document ready and pressure of, from the department’s perspective, ‘we’re the people who deliver the provision, we know it, we want it to be X, why should we have to defend it?’. The institution was saying ‘if X goes in let us take you through the line of questioning and the likely outcome that will appear in the TQA report’...What we found was, after a subject area has been through the activity, they will come back and we can sit at the table and they will say ‘now we understand, now we see why we had that stand off’. We’ve never cracked getting to that position of understanding before the event.*
- In the most recent format: *“the idea was that we would have an [independent] author who was not part of the [Quality Unit] team in itself but who kind of straddled the boundaries and would be able to negotiate with academic colleagues in the subject area how best to write their story...We’ve written [several] like that and they’ve been more successful than our old method, but we’ve still not really cracked the tension between what the centre believes the story should be and what our departments think the story should be.*

For some institutions the appropriate approach involved establishing a Quality Unit (generic term). These had varying remits, structures, and approaches. Some were created early in the external review period and others later. Those operating Quality Units consistently emphasised that the approach was one of guidance and support rather than enforcement. Even in an institution where, in comparison with other universities, the Quality Unit took on a considerable part of the preparatory burden, it was evident that the core responsibility for preparation remained with the department. Those that had gone down the Quality Unit route considered that they had aided the attainment of strong results. One interviewee highlighted that the role of the Quality Unit had gained credibility within the institution through successfully guiding departments to good results.

Generally, those without Quality Units considered that the establishment of such a body might inhibit the ownership of quality assurance within faculties and departments or that guidance and support was best provided in their own institution-specific way. The contrasting approaches in the sector are summed-up by an advocate of a strong Quality Unit approach: *“we saw [preparation for external review] as a University task with an input from the department, whereas my understanding of other universities is that they were at the other end of the spectrum with it being a departmental task with a bit of involvement from the centre”* (pre).

5.2.6.2 The Wider Institutional Overview and Departmental Ownership Balance

Although process changes may have initially been to ensure suitable performance in external assessment, consideration of the correct preparatory approach to adopt and the appropriate balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership often led to a revised approach to the wider quality assurance balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership.

It was evident in several cases, across the sector, that external review played a catalytic role in the subsequent and continuing institutional evolution of quality assurance policy and practice. Such continuing focus and evolution also served to ensure that the enhanced focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision was sustained.

It was apparent that experience of external review and the need to articulate and demonstrate quality assurance practices aided the development of institutionally coherent approaches to assurance. For one interviewee, a key change during the period of external review was that *“we got better at learning within the organisation, at implementing change. We got better at implementing our own policy and procedures” (pre)*.

It is evident that prior to SHEFC TQA pre-1992 and post-1992 universities had contrasting levels of formality in their quality assurance processes. Generally, prior to TQA the pre-1992 universities had internal quality assurance systems that were devolved, informal and operated largely on the basis of trust. However, as external review became embedded and institutional awareness of its importance grew, quality assurance mechanisms and processes evolved, gaining greater formality and structure. Examples of changes included the strengthening of the remit of central and faculty committees and also the revision of internal review, monitoring and reporting policies. Such developments were ways of *“ensuring that our processes and our documentation were fit for purpose” (pre)*.

However, it was emphasised that although there was a need to increase central overview of departmental and faculty practices, this was not intended to reduce local academic responsibility for teaching and its quality assurance. Although part of this development was clearly owed to the natural evolution of universities, it was widely evident that external review was a catalytic factor in the process. For example, one interviewee highlighted that a variety of actions, often building on existing but inconsistent practice, *“emerged because there was this external impetus, the SHEFC-TQA” (pre)*.

Regarding the post-1992 universities, their earlier relationship with the CNAA ensured that they were accustomed to, and largely accepting of, a form of external accountability that operated in addition to external examiners and professional and statutory bodies. However, there was a strong indication that this experience fostered a centralised approach to quality assurance, which may have taken some responsibility away from subject level academic staff.

Generally, post-1992 universities retained their CNAA-based mechanisms but, over varying periods of time, sought to revise, and often streamline, processes in light of the evolution of the institution and the requirements of external accountability. Tied to this was a move to a greater recognition that the satisfaction of external accountability was the responsibility of departments as well as of the centre of the institution. In one institution the need for shared responsibility was highlighted by the reality that satisfying a process as detailed as TQA would require more than their approach to CNAA validation of *“training staff to perform on the day” (post)*.

Across the sector, a key issue was the encouragement of departmental ownership of quality assurance. In attempting to achieve this, several institutions, but particularly in some pre-1992 universities, opted for an iterative approach to institutional policy development, which although time consuming, allowed processes to be based upon existing departmental approaches. In other institutions, the centre took a stronger lead in the definition of policy.

However, regardless of the system used, it was evident that in both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities the common approach was that of operating *“a flexible bureaucracy” (post)*, whereby established university-wide policies allowed a certain amount of freedom of departmental practice in their application. It was widely evident that whilst it was necessary to have an institution-wide approach to policy, there was a strong belief that departments had the core responsibility of ensuring standards and quality, so *“while the admin centre has been somewhat the driver, it is actually implemented at departmental level” (pre)*.

A key aspect in the institutional overview element was the striking of an appropriate balance between policing the practices of departments and supporting them in their ownership tasks. For example, one pre-1992 university Institutional Interviewee highlighted that a strong collegial culture could mean that some departments followed procedures whilst others did not. In such circumstances it was felt that acceptance was more likely to be achieved through encouragement rather than enforcement.

It was also evident that the centre of the university, as well as departments, could be the weak link in the institutional overview and departmental ownership quality assurance chain. For example, in another pre-1992 university a belief that internal assessment procedures were sufficient was highlighted as potentially inhibiting learning from external review. Accordingly, although departments were expected to address any issues in TQA reports, there was no formal monitoring of this even though there was a strict institutional follow-up on internal reviews. Remedial action was implemented for the Subject Review period.

In some post-1992 universities, efforts to embed critical self-evaluation, as opposed to fostering a culture of compliance, faced difficulties. The conscious move from a centralist steer to encouraging departmental responsibility and, accordingly, ownership of quality assurance issues, meant that the balance swung too far from central overview. In one such university, remedial action was taken to ensure that a “*corporate grip*” (*post*) was retained within what was considered to have become a largely successful university-department relationship.

Difficulties in another post-1992 university included faculties and departments creating diverse and onerous quality assurance bureaucracies, even though the devolution campaign had highlighted an overly bureaucratic central approach. Again, remedial action was taken. Despite these transitional difficulties, and some departments responding better than others to the changes, it was highlighted that the developments and related debates had placed the issue of quality assurance firmly on faculty and departmental agendas.

The particular balance between departmental ownership and institutional overview varied between institutions. Similarly, the harmonisation of internal and external processes, initially aimed at aiding preparation but latterly intent on minimising review burden, differed. However, it was clearly evident that institutions across the sector had made considerable progress in their respective endeavours and that this evolution was likely to continue. Although there were benefits in terms of preparation for external review and the reduction in internal-external review burden, it was underlined that the ultimate aim of institutional policy was to establish a rigorous system that would bring internal benefit.

5.2.6.3 An Evolving Move from Assurance to Continuing Enhancement

As well as seeking to obtain an appropriate balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership, a stronger focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching activities was also widely evident. For example, in one university there was a move from departmental reviews focusing primarily on audit, research and strategy, to one that had a greater awareness of teaching and the issues concerning it. Further, the interviewee concerned highlighted that this development was owed to *“an understanding of TQA and Academic Review” (pre)*. The influence of external review regarding the growth of an enhancement focus was evident in another institution which was *“seeing a complete restructuring of one part of the University in part influenced by what some of our senior staff saw elsewhere as Assessors” (pre)*.

Although both of the above examples come from pre-1992 universities, it was clearly evident that in several post-1992 universities their evolving approach to quality assurance had an increasing enhancement focus. Policy revision was aimed at removing unnecessary burden and also at encouraging reflection and developmental action in departments. One interviewee indicated that tied to this was a greater institutional focus on the internal definition and satisfaction of quality and standards rather than compliance with an external system.

As well as encouraging critical self-reflection in departments, there were strong indications that institutions across the sector were developing a more strategic approach to enhancement. There were examples in both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities of evolving efforts to disseminate to the wider university community the good practice found in departments during internal reviews.

An example of the enhanced link between the institution and its departments is illustrated by the view that a significant improvement in the communication meant that departmental information no longer disappeared into a central “*black-hole*” (*pre*) but rather brought a developmental response.

Although approaches increasingly had a greater focus on enhancement, for example one interviewee considered that the evolution was such that “*the development work is much greater than the policing side of things*” (*post*), it was strongly underlined that institutions and departments had always sought to improve matters. This point is summed up well by the view of one interviewee that “*if there’s not quality enhancement then the quality assurance exercise is not running properly*” (*pre*).

Although universities acted in line with their institutional mission and culture, developing policies and practices from an internal perspective, it was apparent that, to varying degrees, external review had “*provided the impetus*” (*pre*) for many developments. Whilst there were some direct links, the strongest body of opinion indicated that external review had acted as a “*catalyst*” (*pre/post*) by heightening the focus on teaching and placing underlying quality assurance issues firmly on institutional and departmental agendas.

Whilst many changes were viewed as being part of the natural evolution of institutions, it was recognised that there remained a close association with external policy developments. For example, although key changes such as the introduction of a departmental review mechanism in a post-1992 university, may have been considered to be part of the natural development of a maturing institution, “*if you think about it in terms of the timescale it came two years into TQA. If you read*

through the coverage and the issues to be addressed then there was a mapping between the two” (post).

An example of the marriage between the long-term influence of externality and natural evolution is provided by an institution where, after several years of TQA, resistance to the introduction of key assurance mechanisms had eroded in favour of an increased acceptance of quality assurance practices. Further this situation illustrates the coming together of internal quality assurance aspirations and external pressures in that although the university decided that this was an appropriate development it was also aware that externally the university *“would be perceived to be a quality assurance mature institution” (pre).*

It was apparent, across the sector, that external assessment had impacted upon the culture of institutions and had created a greater focus on progressing institutional changes to processes. One interviewee considered that the influence as leading to *“a huge amount of institutional learning...that wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t been involved in an external process” (post).* Further, several interviewees indicated that externality also aided their institution in making necessary internal changes whilst maintaining good relations between the university and its departments. Several interviewees, from both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, highlighted that it *“provided the scapegoat for some more unpalatable aspects” (pre)* and managed to *“depersonalise some of the conflicts involved in getting changes made” (pre).* However, one interviewee, whilst acknowledging the leverage that it brought, considered that senior officers should be able to carry the institution with them regardless of having external backing.

Importantly, it was widely evident across the sector that institutions had sustained this renewed focus and would continue to evolve quality assurance and enhancement processes and practices in an effort to assure and improve the quality of learning and teaching provision.

5.2.7 The Development of a Collective Approach to Sector Consultations

As well as institutional and departmental reflection, preparation for external review also took the form of participation in sector methodology discussions. Two key points are evident. Firstly, taking the sector as a whole, the intensity of participation in methodology consultations increased. Secondly, there was a clear move to exercise concerted pressure from the university sector during consultation.

From the inception of TQA, the level and intensity of institutional participation in discussions continued to grow. It seemed that the focus at the end of the 1992-2002 period was consistently stronger than at the beginning.

It was generally indicated that although pre-1992 and post-1992 universities responded to sector methodology consultations, initially there was limited internal debate. This may have been linked to the confidence across the sector, highlighted earlier, that provision or practices would be evidenced as being of a high standard.

Although the universities took part in the TQA consultations, the level of activity appeared to vary, with some institutions heavily involved and others taking a more passive role. Regardless of the level of involvement, several interviewees gave the impression that the implementation of TQA, and the form it took, was unavoidable. One interviewee indicated that experience of CNAA had led to a belief that there would be some form of externality: *“we were never involved in the ‘should there be a process?’ debate, that was assumed” (post)*. For another interviewee, despite taking a highly involved part in the discussions there was a recollection that *“it was to some extent take it or leave it” (pre)*.

With TQA in place, it became clear to institutions that appropriate performance in external reviews was important and that the nature and operation of systems could bring a significant burden. Accordingly, during the Subject Review consultations universities sought to utilise the opportunity to voice their opinions. Such detailed involvement also provided an opportunity to remain fully aware of the details of the likely final process.

With a consistently strong focus from individual institutions came a more collective approach by the sector and the utilisation of formal and informal networks was more readily adopted or used to a greater extent as the period moved from 1992 to 2002. The valuable role of bodies such as the grouping of Research Intensive Universities and particularly the Teaching Quality Forum was widely highlighted. This evidenced the increased awareness of the importance of the potential impact of external accountability and also underlined the view that only a concerted and focused input from institutions would influence such public policy developments.

The impression given is that there was a consistently higher level of importance given to participation in consultations and it seemed that all institutions endeavoured to participate as fully as possible. The impact of TQA had raised the institutional and sector focus on learning and teaching issues, underlined the importance of strong performance, and intensified the willingness to participate and have, according to one interviewee, *“our day at court” (post)*. For another interviewee, active and serious engagement was borne out of a realisation that process definition would continue and that *“we might end up with an inadequate system and if we hadn’t commented we had only ourselves to blame” (pre)*.

However, despite such endeavours, several interviewees strongly voiced their discontentment with the QAA consultations, either in terms of the operation of the discussion process or the ultimate value of it. For example, one interviewee considered that although *“in the rhetoric they took [certain issues] on board” (pre)*, in practice the impact was *“much less salient” (pre)*. Another interviewee observed that *“it was supposed to be an agenda that was implemented post-Dearing by QAA in partnership with the sector...that partnership was largely bogus” (post)*. Further, there was a feeling that by giving little time for traditional collegial debates to be undertaken within institutions, consultation deadlines were illustrative of the disregard for university views.

Although there were varying views on the value of both the QAA consultations and the adopted approach to Subject Review, and indeed the wider Academic Review programme, it was evident that the continuing sector consultations, be these initiated by SHEFC, QAA or the university sector, have served to ensure that teaching and its quality assurance has remained on both sector and institutional agendas.

5.2.8 The Benefit of Participation as Peer Reviewers

A key form of preparation was the participation of academic staff as peer reviewers. Although it was apparent that participation was a recognition of the value of peer review processes, overwhelmingly, the initial and primary purpose was to gain an insight into the process in order to aid institutional and departmental preparation. As noted earlier, generally institutional encouragement was gentle, leaving the final decision to individual academics. It was often evident that where central encouragement was lacking, focused and aware academic staff decided that it would be worthwhile to aid their own preparation for review by gaining knowledge of process.

In several cases institutions that had been slow to nominate peer reviewers or that had achieved disappointing results, considered that increased involvement would be beneficial and moved to a more proactive approach. Institutions that had a strong record of nominating continued with this strategy.

In line with the aim of participation, the key benefit of participation was that it allowed institutions, departments and participants to gain a greater understanding of how the process operated and to obtain an insight into which items to tackle before their own review. The observation that *“this is the only game in town, we’d better learn the rules, we can’t go in there wide-eyed and innocent”* (post) is illustrative of a widely held opinion. It was generally acknowledged that, as highlighted earlier, although participation may initially have been to insure against under-performance, such preparation also brought with it an increased departmental focus on quality assurance issues.

A widely highlighted additional benefit of participation as peer reviewers was that it allowed academic staff to either learn from the good practice of others or gain reassurance that their own existing practices were of a high standard. One interviewee underlined the importance of this aspect in that “*never before has there been such a sharing on the teaching side of ideas...*” (*pre*). For another interviewee, the opportunity to consider the practice of peers led to “*a better-balanced view*” (*post*) of the quality of departmental provision and, where appropriate, could lead to revision and enhancement.

It was evident that the influence of good practice was more likely to be felt at a departmental than institutional level. This was perhaps largely owed to the subject-specific nature of review and also because reviewers generally reported back to their own departments, although in several institutions informal information sessions and discussions were routinely held to aid other subject-areas in their preparations.

5.2.9 Enhancement of Focus on a Long-Term Basis

It was strongly evident that the implementation and operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review enhanced or revitalised the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. The importance of performing well led to reflection upon and revision of policy and practice and, in general, raised the sector, institutional, and departmental focus on teaching and its related issues. Further, such issues remained on sector, institutional, and departmental agendas, with institutions largely successful in their endeavours to sustain this enhanced focus.

It is argued that a cultural shift has taken place. Again, it is not suggested that teaching was not already of a high standard or that staff were not focused on their courses. A culture of assurance and improvement was not created but external assessment acted as a catalyst in the enhancement or revitalisation of an underlying focus. It was consistently underlined that without an existing base to build upon, quality assessment processes would likely have elicited a compliant but hollow response, which was not felt to be the case.

Whilst it was recognised that the benefits might not have filtered to every member of staff, it was generally accepted that external review had a positive influence. One interviewee considered that there was no doubt that external review had *“a beneficial effect throughout the University” (pre)* and that those that had been involved in the process recognised its value.

Further, several interviewees considered that the experience had aided, in the words of one interviewee, a *“culture of continual improvement” (pre)*. It was evident that across the sector external review had resulted in the definition and articulation of practices. For example, one interviewee considered that the influence of an explicit focus on quality assurance meant that it was now *“the culturally accepted norm that certain QA activities will be done” (pre)* and that enhancement practices had become *“more of an accepted part of the culture” (pre)*.

It was strongly evident that the greatest contributing factor to the enhancement of the institutional and departmental focus on a long-term basis was the increased attention paid to teaching and its related issues. One interviewee considered the effect to be *“that teaching and quality is now a major issue and a concern in a way that I’m sure it never would have been had TQA not existed” (pre)*, whilst another was of the opinion that the increased attention gave *“teaching and learning activity a higher credibility within the sector” (post)*. Other facets included the view that participation as reviewers underlined that *“teaching in higher education is very important, it isn’t just research that is important” (pre)* and that, in the opinion of several interviewees, there was now an increased recognition of the value of teaching staff.

It was clearly evident that external review was the catalyst for enhanced preparation, reflection and revision regarding teaching and its quality assurance. As highlighted earlier, although the initial thrust was to ensure appropriate performance in assessments, it is evident that this, in turn, led to broader, long-term, policy and practice developments. It was widely viewed that policies would have developed, though perhaps not in the same way, as part of the natural evolution of the

institutions but that external review had a catalytic influence on this, as illustrated by the following comment: *“Maybe it’s just progress that would have happened anyway but I doubt that. It’s made us think, it’s made us reflect. For all it’s been painful and costly and probably could have been done better, there have been benefits in there as well, you can’t argue against that”* (post). Further, the influence was evident in the conscious move towards enhancement and critical self-evaluation: *“...without the external pressure we would not have gone down this route with anything like the same commitment”* (pre).

The following comment is broadly indicative of views on the influence of external review: *“Is the University better, depending on how you describe better, in 2001 than it was in 1991? Yes, I think it is”* (pre). However, as highlighted earlier, it was consistently underlined that this influence was enabled by the professional approach of academic staff and their positive reaction to the clear requirement to demonstrate the excellence that they believed existed. The positive influence of external review was largely owed to being able to build upon the underlying institutional and departmental acceptance of responsibility for the quality of provision and desire to appropriately discharge this.

Although the external attention was initially *“a driver for change”* (pre), and has *“undoubtedly”* (pre) aided the internal focus on quality assurance and improvement on a long-term basis, the vital point is that the broader attitude and approach *“has now developed a momentum of its own”* (pre), leading to further internally motivated enhancements. Importantly, across the sector, it was widely highlighted that improved practices and the desire for their enhancement would be retained regardless of external pressure. Case Study Example 5.3 illustrates a number of points regarding the influence of external review.

Case Study Example 5.3

The Influence, Benefits and Catalytic Impact of External Review

- **The influence of external review:** *I think that the quality assessment process was very good for this university. A lot of Heads of Department that were involved in it would agree. Some would not but I think that probably the majority would agree. To some extent it is a way of focusing colleagues' attention on the quality of learning and teaching in a way that, with so many other things to concentrate on, particularly research, it would have been difficult to get that attention had it not been for the fact that you could say that in three months time Assessors would be sitting in their office. It concentrates the mind.*

- **The benefits of external review:** *...I think it's useful for two reasons. One is that it holds a mirror up to you in a sense. The other is that you hold a mirror up to yourself...you obviously start looking at your own processes and what you might find. An awful lot of it is about where things get placed on the agenda, the order of priorities. So you might well know that there should have been something that you should have been changing but the Research Assessment Exercise is next year and that has a higher priority, or recruiting is a higher priority, but if you know that someone is coming on the 14th of February next year, that begins to give a certain urgency to a particular issue that you might have been aware of. That might not have been there if you didn't have that event...*

I don't pretend for a minute that it produces huge changes. It produces, I think, significant changes because of that reordering of priorities that it brings about. I think it does give a status to learning and teaching that is threatened by having such an important process as the Research Assessment Exercise. I think unless you have some counterweight to that there is a danger of research significantly overshadowing the learning and teaching function, even though we know very well that if you look at the balance sheet most of our money from the Funding Council comes for teaching....

Equally I wouldn't say for a minute that the reason we spend the time that we do when we take learning and teaching seriously is because of external processes. A much bigger effect is colleagues' commitment to students. I am continually impressed that, in not exactly easy conditions, people are still genuinely committed to the learning of their students. I think that is the underlying thing. If that wasn't there then I think that you could have any number of quality assessment processes that wouldn't do anything other than a bit of window dressing.

I think when you see people in 'The Higher' saying that it was just window dressing and that they pulled the wool over the eyes of the Assessors, either they are being a bit silly and that wasn't what happened or they don't really have a commitment to learning and teaching. I think here it has had a beneficial effect. It's not chalk and cheese; it's just a nudge in the right direction.

- **External review as a catalyst:** *I would agree with that. I don't think that anybody could seriously pretend that it made enormous differences, that you turned departments that were dreadful into departments that were wonderful because of this process. I would think that tuning, if not fine-tuning, is the word. It's giving things a higher sense of importance and priority. Catalyst is almost exactly the right term.*

5.3 The Influence of TQA and Subject Review on a Culturally Distinct Sector

The data gathered from the Institutional Interviews supports the second proposition:

The positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, has occurred across the Scottish university sector, even though institutions are culturally distinct.

The discussion of the first proposition (section 5.2) has evidenced the positive and lasting influence of external review across the university sector. In addition to this, the current section underlines that external quality assessment has influenced culturally distinct universities. Further, it is evident that the importance attached to performance in external review has led to a degree of convergence on quality assurance matters between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, a pivotal factor in which was the operation of the Teaching Quality Forum.

5.3.1 Perceptions of Institutional Cultures

As noted in Chapter Four, Institutional Interviewees were asked to divide ten points across four categories to indicate their perception of the culture of their institution. Higher points represented a greater presence of a particular culture. The exercise is borrowed from McNay (1995). Annex G provides details of the definitions given to the Institutional Interviewees. The responses are set out in Table 5.1. The Institutional Interviewee perceptions of their institutions clearly indicate that universities are culturally distinct. Further, it is noted that generally there was a strong correlation between the perceptions of participants from the same institution. The exercise does not attempt to accurately define the culture of each institution rather it solely seeks to establish that the institutions are culturally distinct.

Table 5.1 Institutional Interviewee Perceptions of Institutional Culture

| Institution | Interviewee | Collegium | Bureaucracy | Corporation | Enterprise |
|-------------|----------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| One | A | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| | B | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Two | C | 1 | 2 | 4 | 3 |
| | D | 1 | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| Three | E | 3.5 | 2 | 3 | 1.5 |
| | F | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Four | G | 2 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| | H | 3 | 6 | 0 | 1 |
| Five | I | 2 | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| | J | 1 | 6 | 1.5 | 1.5 |
| Six | K | 3 | 2.5 | 2 | 2.5 |
| | L | 3.5 | 2 | 1 | 3.5 |
| Seven | M | 2 | 4.5 | 2.5 | 1 |
| | N | 4 | 1.5 | 3 | 1.5 |
| Eight | O | 2.5 | 4.5 | 0 | 3 |
| | P | 2.5 | 2.5 | 3.5 | 1.5 |
| Nine | Q | 9 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| | R | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| Ten | S | 0.5 | 2.5 | 3.5 | 3.5 |
| Eleven | T | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| Twelve | U | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Thirteen | V | 3.5 | 3 | 1.5 | 2 |
| | AVERAGE | 2.8 | 3.4 | 2 | 1.8 |

It is acknowledged that in completing this task, Institutional Interviewees were limited by the categories provided and the definitions given. Discussions with interviewees highlighted that the view of an institution's culture might vary depending on who was asked; that the culture of the institution might not be

constant; and that the culture might vary depending on the context in which the question was set. Further, the culture of their university may vary given the level of change the institution was undergoing at a particular time and that changes in culture could be for a short period of time, with the institution later returning to its traditional cultural balance. A recurring point was that universities continually sought to achieve an appropriate cultural balance in relation to their institutional mission and the external environment, especially during times of change.

Although the exercise has limitations, it sufficiently establishes that the universities in the Scottish sector are culturally distinct. Indeed, differing institutional missions, varying focuses on research and teaching focus, and a spectrum of views on what the balance between university overview and departmental ownership should be, also indicate the universities in the Scottish sector are individually culturally distinct.

The importance of this avenue of investigation is that although it might be expected that, faced with external assessment, culturally-distinct institutions might seek to introduce measures to ensure that they performed well, it is evident from the research data that there has been a long-term, deeper, influence on the focus on the quality assurance of learning and teaching provision and that such an enhancement or revitalisation has occurred across the Scottish sector, even though Institutional Interviewee perceptions indicate that the universities are culturally distinct.

5.3.2 Converging Sub-Sectors

A further indication of the influence that external accountability has had across the Scottish sector is the strong evidence that, regarding attitudes and approaches to quality assurance and its internal and external review, there has been a degree of convergence among universities. Although views varied as to the extent of this convergence, a reasonably representative view is that there is *“a more coherent sector as a result of the external quality assurance process”* (post).

A number of factors were highlighted as aiding this partial convergence. Several interviewees highlighted that witnessing and gaining respect for the provision of

others was influential but it was evident that focusing on the 'common enemy' of externality was pivotal. Linked to this latter point, it was apparent that there was a belief amongst many interviewees that only a concerted effort would ensure that universities had an influence on the operation and development of external accountability.

Through bodies such as the Teaching Quality Forum (originally a committee of COSHEP then, latterly, Universities Scotland), key staff with the responsibility for the institutional management of academic quality regularly came together. There was a clear indication that such interaction led to the sharing of views regarding approaches to the management of quality assurance and an increased awareness of the purpose and aims of institutions on either side of the former Binary Line. Further, it is argued that the enhanced institutional focus on learning and teaching was maintained by this concerted approach to sector consultations adopted by institutions.

A widely held perception was that "*both sides have benefited*" (*pre*) from a sector-wide process that facilitated learning from those on the opposite side of the former binary line. A greater and broader dialogue inherent in this "*coming together*" (*pre/post*) had allowed institutions to learn from each other's experience. One interviewee went further, feeling that a key benefit of external review was that there was "*a shared agenda that has been useful for higher education*" (*post*), allowing institutions to both contribute to, and learn from, process debates and participation.

Generally, there was clear support for the assertion that the pre-1992 universities were becoming more accepting, though perhaps reluctantly, of the reality of external accountability, while post-1992 universities were becoming more vocal and less passively compliant than previously.

It was generally considered that although both sides had moved "*along the spectrum*" (*post*) that ranged from automatic acceptance of external accountability, and the processes used, to wholesale rejection, the sector had not converged entirely.

Indeed, several interviewees indicated that although the challenges of externality may have brought some convergence, *“attitudes are largely a product of the cultures and these are still very different between the two parts of the sector” (pre)*.

There were mixed views regarding whether external accountability had enhanced relationships between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions in terms of subject area interaction. Some Institutional Interviewees considered that external accountability had brought pre-1992 and post-1992 university subject areas together in terms of sharing of experiences and practices and also in gaining respect for each other owing to the greater understanding that peer review facilitated. However, others considered that appropriate subject communities already existed and as such there was no substantial change. Bearing in mind that many Institutional Interviewees had departmental and reviewer experience of the SHEFC/QAA processes, it seemed that the view depended on the individual experience of the cognate area that they were involved in.

5.3.3 Influence of the Teaching Quality Forum

The Teaching Quality Forum (TQF) was widely and openly recognised as being *“a strength of the Scottish system” (pre)*, bringing key academics and administrators with responsibility for quality assurance from across the sector to exchange institutional views on sector-wide quality assurance and external accountability developments.

Formed early in the external review period, the Teaching Quality Forum was widely acknowledged as playing a key role during the operation of external review and had succeeded in aiding individual institutions to speak with a concerted voice, becoming a key consultative group. In terms of the continuing convergence between pre and post-1992 universities on quality assurance, several institutions identified TQF discussion as illustrating that views *“are beginning to coalesce” (post)*.

It was evident from several interviews that in bringing key personnel together, the TQF also facilitated the non-competitive exchange of good practice, often continuing

outside meetings. It is argued that the TQF helped maintain an increased sector-wide institutional focus on the assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching provision.

Several interviewees indicated that the TQF benefited from a small number of member institutions; the relative ease of travel afforded by the geography of Scotland; the open nature of discussions; and the willingness of the Head of the QAA Scottish Office to participate in the spirit of the forum. Linked to this, the existence of a QAA Scottish Office and the approachable nature of its management was widely recognised as a factor in maintaining an effective dialogue between the universities and those operating the external process.

5.4 Impediments to and Options for Continued Focus Enhancement

The data gathered from the Institutional interview supports the third proposition, that:

The benefits to be gained from SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of the processes. Such negative perspectives and the substantial focus on research performance could erode the benefits gained. For the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching to continue to be positively influenced by external processes on a long-term basis, future approaches must instil ownership of quality assurance with subject level academics while retaining a level of institutional assessment sufficient to satisfy the existing external accountability obligation.

This chapter has already established the positive influence of external review. This section will make an assessment of impediments to a continuing influence and detail views on the way forward.

5.4.1 The Fragile Acceptance of External Accountability

There was a clear indication that a greater acceptance of the principle of external accountability existed at the end of the 1992-2002 period than at the beginning. A greater change was evident in the pre-1992 universities, given that CNAA experience had instilled an acceptance of externality in the post-1992 universities. A widely held view was that experience of TQA and Subject Review had led to accountability becoming *“pretty well embedded”* (pre). For one interviewee, although hostility remained, a cultural shift was evidenced by a change in attitudes and, in the pre-1992 universities, the abatement of the view that *“You don’t hear many people nowadays saying the whole thing would go away if only the VCs were a bit firmer”* (pre).

Several interviewees highlighted that the greater acceptance was partly owed to an acknowledgement of how universities were funded and a realisation that external accountability, in some form, would remain. An interviewee, noting an associated factor, highlighted that *“the culture has changed”* (pre) given that new Heads of Department had been accustomed to external review for a substantial part of their careers. However, several interviewees highlighted that the increased acceptance was, to an extent, reluctant and fragile. This was principally, but not solely, found in pre-1992 universities.

It was evident across the sector that there was a considerably greater resistance to the processes used than to the principle of external accountability. The following comment is illustrative of more negative perspectives but is not unrepresentative: *“acceptance of the need for external accountability for the quality of teaching is still very grudging and the methods used to assess and assure quality and standards are fiercely criticised for being overly bureaucratic and intrusive”* (pre).

It was consistently underlined that there was a need for an appropriate, accepted, system that would ensure that the balance with both subject level and institutional autonomy was not compromised by external accountability. It was evident that if this was not achieved, institutions in endeavouring to satisfy their external obligation would, in their relationships with the academic community, find *“keeping them on*

board” (*pre*) increasingly difficult. One interviewee considered that despite using an iterative approach to policy development in relation to satisfying external review and the professional approach of academic staff in adhering to this, “*the individual academic is mystified and sees it as a nuisance*” (*pre*). Linking to the earlier discussion on achieving the appropriate balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership in preparation for external review, several interviewees indicated that departmental views often seesawed between feeling that the process should be centrally managed and objecting to the bureaucracy of such efforts. It seemed that this was borne out of frustration at having to satisfy an external mechanism that they did not identify with.

5.4.2 Negative Aspects of TQA and Subject Review

Although the beneficial influence of external review was widely recognised, detriments were commonly and strongly voiced. Indeed, several interviewees doubted whether the benefits of the systems outweighed the detriments. This view was founded on concerns regarding the relevance and burden of TQA and Subject Review. There was concern that the continued operation of a process that was perceived to be retrospective and bureaucratic could foster negative views of assurance as bureaucracy and “*quality as compliance*” (*pre*) rather than support a culture of enhancement.

A widely highlighted detriment was the amount of time expended by institutions and departments on satisfying external accountability and the opportunity cost to other activities including teaching. However, it was evident that the desire to perform well may have increased the workload, with one interviewee pondering that “*how much of the burden of it is actually self-imposed as opposed to being imposed by SHEFC or QAA is an interesting question*” (*pre*).

Several interviewees highlighted the financial burden of satisfying external accountability. These were evident in a number of ways such as the preparation of additional documentation, and having staff devoted to satisfying the requirements of external accountability. Interviewees from smaller institutions highlighted the

disproportionate cost of using formal mechanisms with limited staffing when informal practices could operate well on a small scale.

Across the sector, concerns were raised regarding the operation of the processes and the scope for inconsistency. Although grade inflation over the period of the TQA process was highlighted by several interviewees, the most common and strongest criticism of the processes was that some reviewers came with “*agendas and expectations*” (*post*) and accordingly did not respect institutional diversity. This could have an additional negative effect on morale when “*people feel that the reviewers haven’t understood how the department makes sense of what it does*” (*pre*) and it was perceived that an unfair result was received. Case Study Example 5.4 illustrates elements of the above.

The use of weak evidence in judgements was highlighted by several interviewees. The disappointment regarding this was compounded and “*dispiriting*” (*pre*) when weaknesses in the report were acknowledged and the report was altered but the grading remained. Further, such disillusionment could strongly counter the internal quality assurance momentum created by preparation for external review.

A strongly voiced criticism was that honesty in self-assessment regarding weaknesses was punished, whereby “*you got them back in the report and you couldn’t be Excellent because you had those weaknesses*” (*pre*). Linked to this feeling, there was a perception that some reviewers worked from a premise that “*presumes guilt rather than innocence*” (*post*). One interviewee indicated that institutions and departments learned from what they felt were harsh experiences: “*I’m not saying one should justify or condone weaknesses but there was certainly every incentive to hide them if you could. Of that there is no doubt*” (*pre*).

Although the desire to perform well in external reviews was a factor in driving forward institutional and departmental preparations, there were negative aspects attached to this. Several interviewees highlighted that external review was a “*highly competitive exercise*” (*pre*) and that this was detrimental to some inter-institution

subject area relationships, particularly, but not entirely, in small cognate areas or when there was doubt about the validity of judgements made by peer reviewers. There was also evidence that in some cases a motivating factor for undertaking the peer review role was that participation could be a protective measure. This pragmatic approach was particularly prevalent in smaller cognate areas.

Case Study Example 5.4

External Review Detriments: Process Weaknesses

The experience was a very unhappy one because one of the external assessors was replaced at the last minute by a fairly powerful individual...well known in the profession, who had his own agenda. There was a weak convenor. This caused a lot of problems within the department.

So the experience of going through TQA had some value but it wasn't as valuable as it might have been. There was a lot of hostility generated by this particular individual, unnecessarily so. In the end when the draft report came through, the Head of Department wasn't able to be present for the discussion with the Lead Assessor so I took his place and we spent something like three and a half hours going through the report, more or less line by line, chaired by [a senior officer], questioning the evidence for a lot of the statements that were made, and getting the Lead Assessor to withdraw most of the critical statements or tone them down because the evidence wasn't there. The dispiriting thing was that at the end of this the judgement didn't change as a result of this process. I think that there was a view among my colleagues that the department got shafted.

So that was not a good experience though what came out of it were certain things to do with our [course] which people acknowledged were fairly based, and did provide an impetus for fairly radical review and change. Now that was positive but what was negative was the notion that there was one way of doing things and that was the way in which others did it, rather than the way we sought to do it here. I think that was a fairly negative experience to go through. All the more so when it turned out that all those involved in the visit, their own institutions miraculously came out with Excellents. I'm not making any allegations but that did leave an unpleasant taste.

5.4.3 The Relationship with the Research Assessment Exercise

A key indicator of the impact of TQA and Subject Review, and potential influence of a third generation of assessment, was their role in raising the focus on teaching in an era when the RAE underlined the importance of research performance. The RAE, approximately every five years, provides ratings for research across all disciplines to “enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality” (RAE web, 2001). The importance of performance in the RAE, with the heightened status and additional funding that it brought to departments and universities, was highlighted across the sector as being a key focus for institutions.

There was a strong view that in raising institutional awareness of teaching and related issues “*TQA was a very important counterweight to RAE*” (*pre*). For example, one interviewee concluded that “*had there been the RAE and no system of TQA and no external focus on teaching, that might have augured badly in terms of the relative attentions placed upon it*” (*pre*). However, several interviews underlined that for their institutions, teaching was their primary focus, their “*bread and butter*” (*pre/post*). Further, interviewees from universities where “*cultures were predominately associated with research*” (*pre*) consistently highlighted the importance of learning and teaching. This is underlined by the view of one interviewee that the dual focus was the reason why one particular RAE-strong institution was “*a university and not a research institution*” (*pre*).

It was evident that although the external review of learning and teaching may have acted, to some extent, to counterweight the focus on research, the importance of performance in the RAE to both departments and institutions remained firmly to the fore in many institutions. This was emphasised by several interviewees. Further, there was a strong view that performance in the RAE, be it positive or negative, brought a more intense and sustained institutional reaction than similar performances in external reviews of teaching.

Although in the minority, several interviewees highlighted that given that the pressure of the RAE remained, TQA and Subject Review were additional burdens and that the external assessment of research and teaching was a “*double whammy*” (*pre*) that may have actually made the attitude to teaching worse.

5.4.4 Research-Teaching Focus

Linking with views on the importance of RAE performance, it is evident that despite the influence of TQA and Subject Review, the traditional research-teaching focus and the financial imperative of research performance for both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities cannot be ignored. Whilst the TQA and Subject Review processes have had a long-term effect in terms of raising the focus on learning and teaching, there was evidence that the primacy of, or increasing focus on, research in many

institutions meant that a continuing, but appropriate, external assessment of learning and teaching would be required to halt such influence subsiding.

Across the sector, the importance of research performance was apparent. Generally, the institutional balance in pre-1992 universities favoured research over teaching. For example, one interviewee considered that *“the culture is very much focused on the research...the RAE underscored and emphasised that...”* (pre).

Generally, the primary focus in post-1992 universities was learning and teaching. However, the view that *“we define the eligibility for university title to be that we are research active....”* (post) was strongly emphasised. Although research was generally focused in smaller areas than in the many of the pre-1992 universities, its increasing importance was evident, as illustrated by the following comment: *“certainly we’re an institution that was originally one with an emphasis on teaching and education. Research was very much seen as an add-on, an increasingly important add-on...it is important to up the research on two counts, one to effectively support your higher level programmes, and two, as sources of income other than SHEFC. So there is a business imperative and a quality imperative...”* (post).

Institutions sought to strike a balance in their focus on research and teaching that was appropriate to their mission, and in all cases it was emphasised that, regardless of the extent of the focus on research, teaching was considered to be both a core activity and of a high standard. Indeed, several interviewees highlighted that a strong research performance did not necessarily detract from the excellence of teaching, as evidenced by RAE and TQA/Subject Review results. Further, it was widely highlighted that although strong research performance brought resource and status, the core funding that teaching secured was recognised, as was the value of TQA performance in terms of university profile.

There was substantial evidence, across the sector, that there was a strong desire that, be it traditional or emerging, the focus on research should not be to the detriment of learning and teaching. However, it was apparent that although external

accountability had underlined the importance of learning and teaching issues, the credibility, status, and financial reward that research brought was hugely important to institutions, and many departments and academic staff across the sector.

5.4.5 Promotion Actuality

The influence of research in universities is also apparent in promotion actuality. Although promotion criteria included teaching and administration, promotion to senior positions (e.g. Professor) was heavily based upon research performance. Generally this applied across the sector but was more evident in pre-1992 universities. The situation is illustrated by the following comment: *“There is now explicit recognition of teaching in the promotion criteria but the feeling is that when the chips are down research still dominates...certainly in promotions to Chairs that is the overriding consideration”* (pre). Indeed, this situation was widely recognised within institutions: *“...academics probably are aware that in terms of the career structure for advancement as an academic, research credibility gives you increased mobility, status, power, and freedom. There is a reality about that”* (pre).

Achieving an institutionally appropriate balance between research and teaching in terms of promotion was difficult. Examples from across the sector highlighted that a focus on research, and in turn its link to promotion, could leave teaching-focused staff feeling undervalued or inadvertently discourage young academic staff, though undertaking their teaching obligations conscientiously, from devoting time to developing courses.

Across the sector there was recognition that a substantial number of staff had a primary focus on teaching and that institutions must strive to recognise both this role and the value of these employees. For example, in one pre-1992 university increased selectivity in including staff as part of the RAE submission evidenced the above situation and highlighted that promotion procedures should redress the over-emphasis on research performance.

The link between the need for greater recognition of teaching staff and the difficulty in assessing the quality of teaching provision was highlighted by several interviewees. Whilst there was a recognised mechanism for assessing research performance, there was no clear method for evaluating the contribution of teaching staff. This applied even in institutions where teaching-related promotion appeared to be stronger, as illustrated by the following comment: *“If I’m honest I wouldn’t be confident in saying that we promoted people who were good teachers. We promoted people who were good programme managers, leaders, and curriculum developers. I don’t think that we were sophisticated enough to distinguish between that and teaching itself” (post).*

Although it was apparent that an increased focus on recognising teaching contributions was emerging across the sector, this only had a limited impact on senior promotions. However, institutions sought to continue to pursue this avenue. While it might take time for the revised criteria to become embedded, a failure to make this necessary *“cultural shift” (pre)* could lead to valuable teaching staff leaving or becoming demoralised. The development of a (generically titled) Teaching Fellow Scheme was identified by a small number of interviewees from both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities as a way of *“raising the profile of learning as a worthwhile activity” (post)* and redressing research-focused promotion actuality.

Bringing views on the research-teaching balance, the actuality of promotion and the influence of the RAE together, it is argued that although the quality of learning and teaching is an important issue for universities across the sector, this has often only been implicit and has often been overshadowed by the need to ensure research performance or to develop a research agenda.

5.4.6 The Need for a Revised Approach

It was widely evident that there was a need for a revised approach to the external review of learning and teaching, with the dominant view that the continued operation of subject level review would have yielded diminishing returns. Although several Institutional Interviewees felt that SHEFC TQA could have continued to operate with

appropriate revision or in its Joint Review Group format, the following comment illustrates the general view across the sector: *“the SHEFC TQA process did result in the concept being embedded in HE more than anything else did probably, but I think as far as benefit was concerned, one cycle was enough...first time round it allowed every department to be self-critical, but you wouldn't get anything like that extent of benefit second time round”* (post).

Although the QAA, with an extended remit that included standards, endeavoured to offer a progressive, developmental agenda, there was a widely held view that it attempted to *“do far too much in far too short a time”* (pre). Indeed, one interviewee considered the approach to be one of *“endless hammer blowing”* (pre). Several interviewees from post-1992 universities welcomed the QAA articulation of the broader standards agenda but a greater number of pre-1992 and post-1992 universities considered the wider QAA agenda to be onerous and compliance-oriented. Although participation remained strong, several interviewees indicated a diminished enthusiasm among staff to participate as peer reviewers during the QAA Subject Review period.

The extent of the external accountability that universities faced was highlighted by several interviewees and considered to be excessive, as illustrated by the following comment: *“I think it's been over the top...Subject Reviews, Continuation Audit, Overseas Audit, and the RAE”* (post). Further, there was a strong body of opinion that there should be recognition that SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review had evidenced that learning and teaching provision was consistently of a high standard. This view is illustrated by the following comment: *“At the time of TQA, when it was being set up, there was a political agenda... that if you're going to have mass higher education something must have slipped, there was an over-reaction. None of the evidence shows that the standard did slip”* (post). It was strongly evident that a more trusting form of external review was sought.

5.4.7 A Balance between Trust and Accountability

Although there were varying views on the level of acceptance, it was apparent that the academic community had, 'on the whole, recognised and acknowledged that external accountability had become, and would remain, an integral part of higher education policy.

Indeed, several interviewees considered that the continued existence of an external system of accountability would help sustain the institutional and departmental focus on teaching and its quality assurance. Although pressures such as student recruitment would provide a continued focus on the quality of provision, it was highlighted that there was a danger that departments, perhaps subconsciously, would become "*much more laissez faire*" (*post*) without external accountability.

There was a clear indication, taking the sector as a whole, that research performance was weighted more heavily in terms of the institutional and departmental balance with teaching; the actuality of promotion; and staff perceptions of the best way to progress their careers. Several interviewees considered that the removal of an external focus on learning and teaching would be detrimental given the propensity and pressure to concentrate on research issues.

Several interviewees highlighted the need to finally develop, agree and settle upon a system of external quality assurance, having already "*reinvented the wheel several times*" (*pre*). Although a substantial revision to the external accountability methodology was widely sought, several interviewees underlined that the continuing uncertainty and instability regarding the methodology was detrimental in terms of maintaining a focus on externality. There was also dissatisfaction that Scotland had, in essence, been used as a pilot for QAA Subject Review, and that shifting of processes did not aid credibility with the academic community.

Taking views as a whole, there was widespread feeling that failure to move to an accepted, flexible, system could bring undesirable rigidity and conformity that may restrict evolution and, in an ever-changing sector, could become an encumbrance.

5.4.8 The Need for Academic Ownership

A recurring, strongly voiced, opinion was that for a future methodology to be accepted and owned by academics, and thus produce the greatest benefit, it would have to be considered to be appropriate and relevant. This view is illustrated by the view of one interviewee that a system must be *“perceived by the staff as being a valid test” (pre)*, otherwise *“it’s always going to meet resistance” (pre)*, even from those that felt that the principle of accountability was sound. The same interviewee considered the crux of that matter to be that academic staff would *“resent it if it’s felt that they’re actually being inhibited from doing this good job by the system that they have to conform to” (pre)*.

It was highlighted that the issue of process relevance would be vital in obtaining ownership and that there was a need for *“more convergence between what the academics perceive as having genuinely good outcomes and the nature of the system itself” (pre)*. Another illustration of the need for academic ownership is set out in Case Study Example 5.5.

It was apparent that sector-wide institutional recognition, linked to an existing internal focus, had to an extent empowered those with central responsibility for quality assurance to progress the development of internal processes. It appeared that their aim was to ensure that the satisfaction of external requirements could be appropriately aligned with the culture and operation of their university while further developing their institution’s internal quality assurance and enhancement agenda. However, it is argued that the opportunity to achieve this would be threatened if the system was perceived to be inappropriate.

Several interviewees voiced their concern that institutional efforts to co-ordinate the satisfaction of external assessments could, despite best intentions, drive a wedge between the centre of the university and academic staff. In one institution, which emphasised the need to follow an iterative approach to develop policy, there remained a feeling that *“there is still a gulf between the ordinary academic and what is happening in the committees” (pre)*. A situation whereby universities were

endeavouring to satisfy an external system that had not gained the acceptance of the wider academic community, would, it is argued, further stress this relationship.

Case Study Example 5.5

The Value of External Review, Academic Ownership, and a Relevant System

• **The value of external review:** *It was another set of hoops in one sense but I think that, like anything that you're forced to prepare for, it makes you reflect...We'd had the annual report function and the quinquennial review function and I think that eventually all of that...tends to become at least partially mechanistic.*

I think that you need that kick every so often. You need something, some sort of impetus that really makes you stop and say what is it we're doing? Why are we doing it that way? How do we know we're good? I think something that encourages you...

...Certainly that's what the TQA did for us, it made you reflect long and hard about what you do and how you do it...

• **The need for academic ownership:** *...the situation at present is that there is quality as academics live and breath it and then there is quality assurance, and the two don't talk to each other. Somehow we've got to get the two talking to each other. I think that the internal systems have to be therefore systems that encourage self-reflection, with a thump if it doesn't happen.*

My own view is that some of the material that QAA has developed...could be used for that, but I think that the nature of the debate has been such that most academics wouldn't see that as having anything to do with them other than as an externally imposed superstructure. I think it's that the two ends don't talk to each other. The discourse isn't there because the language is different. I think that the vast majority of academics do think about what they teach, how they teach, what students think, and how well it's done, all the time. You're doing it, consciously or subconsciously, most of the time. It's convincing them then that for a variety of reasons some of that has to be documented, and that the reflection has to be documented. I think that they're running on parallel tracks at the moment rather than crossing over.

• **The need for a relevant system:** *...for good democratic reasons we should be held accountable, so there should be some mechanism. I genuinely believe that. People out there who earn a fraction of my salary pay for me to come and do the job I do. We should be held to account for that. I mean that, it may sound really pious, but I genuinely mean that. It's getting it right.*

...ideally what you want to aim for is something with as light a touch as you can get it. I'm back to that quandary that I've always had – if there had been no TQA, no Continuation Audit, no Subject Reviews, would we be doing what we're doing and thinking about it the way we're thinking about it? I don't think we would be. I think it was necessary.

...I'd like to think eventually, as I said to you earlier, that it gets to such a stage that we're all in such a mindset that we don't need it anymore because we can do it automatically, it's built-in, but I think things become mechanistic, that's just the nature of it because there's so much to do, the environment has changed, everyone is incredibly busy. So you probably do need some sort of focus, as light as it can be, that every so often forces you to step back and say what have we been doing?

It was apparent that as the 1992-2002 period progressed, relationships between the university sector, SHEFC and, latterly, the QAA had grown, and aided a more open

and genuine dialogue. However, it is argued that this relationship could revert to a more adversarial nature if the now more closely converged university sector considered that SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review evidence of the consistently high quality of learning and teaching provision across the sector would not lead to a 'light touch' system of accountability. It is argued that a more confrontational relationship would be less likely to foster learning and teaching development, as the focus would again be on accountability-autonomy policy debate rather than on the development of a process providing 'light touch' assurance and aiding enhancement.

It is evident from the research results that the institutional and departmental focus, on a long-term basis, of assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision was enhanced despite concerns about the processes. Indeed, SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were addressed by staff in a professional manner that often put pride in their provision in front of personal scepticism about the processes used. However, it is also evident, taking the diminished enthusiasm to act as peer reviewers as an example, that such academic goodwill is likely to continually weaken unless the process is accepted as being one that is focused on enhancing learning and teaching provision rather than perceived as a mistrusting mechanism with the prime role of exacting accountability.

Of course, even if the process used was not accepted by academics, the legal requirement for accountability would remain and institutions and academic staff would endeavour to satisfy their obligations. However, it is evident that this would be likely to create a compliance culture rather than foster enhancement. It is argued that inertia would be more likely than innovation, fostering an albeit subconscious view that once a department had been assessed external reviewers would not be back for several years *"so we don't need to worry about these things to the same extent"* (post).

A further danger for a compliance-orientated, standardised approach is that it can discourage institutions from tackling broader developmental issues themselves. For example, in one post-1992 university TQA highlighted that the institution should

take control of its own processes and quality assurance, post-CNAA. However, the broader focus of the QAA agenda, whilst attempting to ensure standards, meant that the institution *“lost a little bit of our own way”* (post) and delayed developments in order to gain guidance to ensure that it remained externally compliant in an effort to avoid having to change step again in a short timescale.

5.4.9 Institutional Rather Than Subject Level Review

It should be noted that although the interviews were conducted over a short time period, this was one of intense and rapidly changing debate. As such some of the comments on the way forward for external quality assurance were based on greater information on the emerging SHEFC/QAA Enhancement Led Institutional Review methodology.

It was widely highlighted that to aid ownership, subject level review should be solely internal but an external peer-review assessment of institutional mechanisms could be undertaken in order to satisfy the accountability obligation. A detailed illustration of this view is given in Case Study Example 5.6.

Although there was a desire for a less onerous, more relevant system, the value of subject level interaction was recognised. Several interviewees underlined that continued sharing of experience at subject level would be valuable, with one interviewee underlining that this was where *“the real engagement takes place”* (pre). The redirection of the principal external focus from subject to institution might mean that it would be difficult for the process to impact upon a large proportion of academics. One Institutional Interview highlighted that what it *“is always essential to remember is that for the vast majority of academics the department is basically where they live in the university system. If it’s not impacting upon their department, it’s not impacting upon them”* (pre).

Further, several interviewees highlighted the concern that because the external review of the subject level had ended, the wider academic community might perceive that external accountability had gone too. An interviewee indicated that *“if there is*

too much of a lull between the end of Subject Review and the start of the next process then departments will wind down once again...I think you have to maintain a certain amount of momentum in order to keep a certain amount of focus on quality assurance or enhancement" (pre).

Case Study Example 5.6

Institutional Review and University Autonomy

- **The strength of internal systems:** *...What I do believe we've moved to, and I hope we've moved to, is that all institutions, whatever their background, have got developed quality systems, because they wouldn't have got through TQA without them, they wouldn't have got through Subject Review. So I think the time is right now that we can get away with having systems.*

- **A preference for Institutional Review:** *...I'm much, much more wedded to an external body that audits what you do against national benchmarks, or whatever, but lets you get on with it and you've to demonstrate that you're achieving it, than an external body that comes with it's own presumptions of how it's to be done, or expectations of how it's to be done, and it doesn't matter what you do, if it's not check-listed then you're wrong. Then you become a very straight-jacketed system.*

I think you've got to have benchmark guidelines that ultimately demonstrate certain outcomes, or certain key things, but there should be institutional autonomy to develop their systems as it sees fit, based on its nature, its culture, whatever, to achieve that. Then I'm quite happy that your internal processes, as you've defined them, should provide the raw material for any external verification that you're doing it. As long as that verification does not become process driven, in other words – unless you have committee x, and a process for y, then you can't achieve the outcome. I'm not in favour of that, but if you're allowed to say here are our processes, they're designed to ensure this, and here's the evidence to prove that they do it, I'm comfortable with that. I think that is a sign of a mature system.

It'll cut down on the bureaucracy because people will not be creating new documents for the external. It will mean that you have the one system which is your internal system. It'll furthermore mean that it's got to be taken seriously. It'll not be the case of rewriting things for the inspection. As they are live documents to be used over time, there's more incentive to get it right. The audit will be based on what you've developed to achieve whatever outcomes have to be externally measured. I think the sector is mature enough to do that. It then becomes more difficult for people to argue why they shouldn't have systems. You've got a system but you don't have to redo it again. As soon as an external system requires new documentation, people say why do we bother with the internal?

It's a double level. We've got to get an external system that actually interfaces with an institution's internal processes and draws from its outcomes. It ends up that those institutions make sure they provide those outcomes. That to me has sufficient autonomy, fitness for purpose depending on the institution, and allows the externality, which I think has to happen, there's no way to believe it if there isn't, but in a way it's not going to overload or be too bureaucratic.

5.4.10 The Requirement for a Clear Enhancement Agenda

With the aim of gaining the maximum benefit from the new methodology and with the desire to ensure that academic staff felt that the process was relevant and positive, an enhancement focus for external review was sought by several interviewees. With this focus the necessary level of review would hopefully avoid either creating a compliance culture or receiving grudging acceptance. It was hoped that the academic community would respond to the positive nature of an enhancement agenda, whereas *“Quality control, quality assurance, can still have a perception of policing, a Big Brother type situation” (post)*.

Whilst a move to an enhancement agenda was welcomed, and there was a realisation that teaching would evolve as methods and approaches developed, caution was expressed by an interviewee that the ideal of continuous year-on-year improvement should be *“one that we have to temper with realism” (pre)*.

5.5 Summary

The results of the Institutional Interviews clearly indicate that the operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities acted as a catalyst in the enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, on a long-term basis. Further, this influence has impacted across a sector consisting of culturally distinct institutions.

However, it is also clearly evident that these benefits are strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of external accountability processes. Further, if the institutional and departmental focus for assuring and improving learning and teaching is to continue to be positively influenced by external accountability processes, an appropriate balance must be constructed that instils ownership with subject level academics while ensuring a level of institutional overview sufficient to satisfy external accountability.

The Head of Department Interviews and the Sector Interviews, the results of which are set out in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven respectively, support and supplement the finding of the Institutional Interviews by adding overlapping Head of Department Interview and Sector Interview perspectives. The conclusion to this thesis, set out in Chapter Eight, will discuss the research propositions and research results in the context of public policy developments and the current literature.

Chapter Six

Head of Department Interviews

6.1 Introduction

Head of Department Interviewees formed the second stage of the three phase data gathering processes. The Head of Department Interviews followed the Institutional Interviews and preceded the Sector Interviews. As detailed in Chapter Four, the data from each distinct set of interviews would be used to supplement and, where appropriate, triangulate the data gathered in the other phases.

As noted in Chapter Four, Head of Department Interviewees were provided with a summary (see Annex I) of the research results drawn from the Institutional Interviews. Whilst the interviews were based on this summary, the semi-structured format allowed scope to explore individual and specific interviewee experiences in detail.

This chapter establishes that the data gathered from the Head of Department interviews support relevant aspects of the Institutional Interviews. Further, Proposition One and Proposition Three are also supported. Proposition Two was not explored given that the Head of Department Interviews were drawn from a single university.

To enable a comparison of the data gathered, this chapter follows the same basic structure as utilised in presenting the results of the Institutional Interviews. However, to aid concise presentation some sections are aggregated. Further, as only elements relevant to the Head of Department experience were covered in the interviews, some sections appearing in the Institutional Interviews chapter, are omitted. Appropriate reference to this is made in the chapter.

As detailed in Chapter Four, the rationale for undertaking the Head of Department Interviews in a single university is readily justifiable. However, it is noted that views

on issues such as institution-department interaction may be institution specific. Nevertheless, these elements have been retained as they may provide readers with further information upon which to draw their own conclusions and it also provides context as to the other issues discussed.

As with the preceding chapter, the discussion of the research data follows a narrative rather than statistical format and uses appropriate qualitative descriptors. As noted in Chapter Five, such an approach has been commonly used in related studies (e.g. Morley 2003, Drennan, 2000, Henkel, 2000). Again, the narrative is representative of the research data, identifying and discussing broad themes but also detailing and illustrating, through the use of quotes, constituent elements. Further, seven Case Study Examples provide additional insight to key points. Each Case Study Example is drawn from a different interview and thus a different academic department. Further they are drawn from across the participating faculties.

6.2 The Catalytic Influence of TQA and Subject Review

The data gathered from the Head of Department Interviews corroborates the support by the Institutional Interview phase of Proposition One that TQA and Subject Review had a catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. A number of factors were evident and are discussed below.

6.2.1 The Importance of Performance

Generally, there was support for the assertion that a key factor in focusing performance was the competitive nature of external review. The following comment illustrates this from both a departmental and peer-reviewer perspective: *“The department certainly had elements of ‘we’ve got to do better than others’. That’s what I also found as Lead Assessor”*. However, other interviewees considered the process to be non-competitive and open or that *“competition was peer group based”* and accordingly less tense.

As in the Institutional Interviews, it was evident that academic professionalism was perhaps the principal factor. For example, one interviewee felt that *“as much as anything it was a matter of pride and that was significant”*. Other drivers of performance were leadership, status and student numbers, as illustrated by the following comment: *“The Head of Department was committed and recognised that there were benefits in doing well, in terms of the positioning of the department against [rival departments] and as an incentive to recruitment.”*

6.2.2 The Development of Awareness and Focus

As in the Institutional Interview phase, it was widely and strongly evident from the Head of Department Interviews that the existence of external scrutiny increased the level of focus on teaching and its quality assurance. For several interviewees the change in awareness applied both to the department and the individual academic members of staff. One interviewee considered the impact as follows: *“[It brought] a focus on outcomes and of students as customers. We’ve always kind of recognised that but I think it has made it sharper and that’s a good thing, the greater need to look at what you’re doing from the students’ point of view.”*

Although it was emphasised that departments would have improved their approaches to learning and teaching as part of their natural evolution it was evident that without the pressure of external scrutiny this might have been slower and with a lower priority. Further, having emphasised the role of teaching more, the opportunity for enhancement to develop existed, given there was now *“more of a feeling of pride, more of a feeling of a requirement to work on teaching”* and an emphasis on the value of this role.

Whilst there was an increase in focus on teaching and its quality assurance, it is not suggested that departments or academic staff were not already actively pursuing the assurance and improvement of the quality of their provision. Indeed, *“a very strong commitment to teaching”* was widely and strongly emphasised. For example, although the peer-reviewer experience of one interviewee led to the opinion that during TQA visits to some institutions *“you could smell that the paint was still wet,*

on the walls and also on the handouts”, the reality in his own department was that “...we were actually doing it, we were living it. For all that I’m saying that it was a game, it was a game that we were actually playing rather than an artificial construct.”

6.2.3 The Influence of Departmental Leadership, Preparation and Reflection

It was overwhelmingly evident that departments took responsibility for preparation, aided to varying degrees by general university guidance and overview. The practice of inter-department or faculty discussions and critiques was highlighted as being valuable by several interviewees. Indeed, one interviewee considered that although light-touch central guidance was helpful, *“the Faculty group was by far the best, particularly in terms of constructing the self-assessment document, and in being able to see what other people were doing.”*

Approaches to preparation for SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review varied between departments, as did the nature and extent of departmental leadership. However, the participation of staff throughout departments and the value of departmental leadership were widely evident. Case Study Example 6.1 illustrates a number of aspects of review preparation, some of which are discussed in this section whilst others are considered later in the chapter.

In most departments the Head of Department or a nominee with their clear support, such as the Director of Teaching, wrote the core document then offered it to the wider department for consultation. The following comment is a helpful illustration: *“...the self-assessment document, by and large, I wrote myself and then put it out to consultation...I think at the end of the day there was a recognition that it was very difficult to do this by committee. In terms of gathering the evidence, pretty well everyone was involved...I think that’s important...Certainly with that style of review it was impossible to avoid that because it was detailed.”*

Several interviewees indicated that this approach to preparation bonded staff in departments. One interviewee described the situation as follows: *“It certainly*

brought us together, not that we've ever been a particularly problematic department in that respect...During the week that the Assessors were there we were as one and even the most difficult members of staff...were pulling their weight and batting for the Department."

Case Study Example 6.1

Review Preparation

Rationale for becoming a peer reviewer: *It was similar to what you've got in your overview. When I read it, it struck a chord. There wasn't any strong encouragement from the institution, as I recall. There were a number of reasons for participating. Firstly, it was a case of profile because I was aware that every other department in [this cognate area] was putting forward people. I took the view that, they're all in there, we need to be in there. From a personal point of view, I have to say that I like doing things like that. I like being an external examiner; I like seeing how other people do things. I also felt that it was important for my individual profile. I honestly don't think that pressure from the institution was all that significant.*

Departmental preparation: *...This is a professionally accredited course. A lot of the things that the TQA process was doing, we had been doing for years. Every four years we had to go through the accreditation process. The TQA structure wasn't what we had been dealing with but it wasn't a thousand miles away from it...*

My view as Head of Department was that it was a team-building exercise. I've got to say that not every member of staff was involved in that team exercise. My philosophy as Head of Department was to provide lots of opportunities. The stance I took was that if people didn't want to get involved, that was their decision. The documentation went through something like six drafts internally. Each time it was produced a meeting was held and there was an opportunity for people to contribute to it. I wrote it. This was because it was only a couple of thousand words. I took the view that it would be pointless to parcel it up into wee bits because I'd end up with a massive editing job. So I collected people's views, produced something and discussed it. I think it was a team-building exercise. I guess that two-thirds of the members of staff possibly bought into that and the rest of the staff didn't. I thought that it was reasonably successful in building a corporate effort.

...I think it was useful as a team-building exercise including for the students because they were involved in aspects of it. We also tried to involve them in the run-up to the visit by letting them see drafts of the documentation and had a number of open meetings. I think that was a benefit. It made the students aware. It possibly brought them on-board a wee bit more than they might have been.

...I think within the department it was treated very seriously and in retrospect we couldn't have done anymore than we did. A lot of time and effort went into it. I felt that we had pretty good procedures in place already...

University overview: *I'm conscious that some universities seem to be incredibly centralised, doing things that are lunacy. People complain that departments won't take ownership but it's obvious they won't if the Registry is going to do everything for them.*

In this institution I think there was a very, very light touch from the centre. I think the only formal thing that happened was that a committee reviewed our draft and I had to go before it and receive the comments...I would have appreciated it if someone had looked in a lot more detail at what the stated objectives were and actually given me a considered view. Whether it was lack of time or not, I didn't come away with the view that anybody had actually sat down and looked at it with that level of detail. It's not to suggest that I wanted a lot of direction from the centre, I didn't, but I would have appreciated someone from the centre looking critically at what we had written alongside what the criteria were.

As in the Institutional Interviews, interviewees generally indicated that external review had a catalytic influence on enhancing the focus on teaching and its quality assurance. Widely recognised benefits were that existing practices were tuned, and implicit often ad hoc mechanisms were placed higher on the agenda and became explicit and routine. For example, one interviewee considered that making practices more explicit could ensure that departments were “*all up to the same standard*” even though such practices may have been in place “*throughout the University implicitly anyway.*”

For another interviewee, the process brought lasting improvements both to practice but also to awareness: “*I think it’s more than just writing down what was implicit, I think it has sharpened the focus. I think that has been a benefit and is one which will continue*”. Case Study Examples 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 illustrate, amongst other points, aspects of the catalytic influence of external review.

Case Study Example 6.2

The Positive and Negative Influence of a Strong Result

One of the benefits was quite clearly that it increased morale in that an external group had looked at the department. To be fair a pretty strong team was brought to assess [the department]. It was a team of people who would have been prepared to say that [the department] might seem to be good but they are kidding everybody, it was all a Western film-set. So it increased morale and people took an increased interest in it. It did lead people to think why are we so backward in terms of our teaching and learning practices? Why do we insist that students have two hours of lectures and one hour of tutorials when everyone tells us that lecturing is the most ineffective way of people learning? So they did begin to look at what they were learning and initially there were some changes.

For a while there was a bit of a buzz but one of the downsides of it was that three years down the road they began to get complacent. That complacency was reinforced by the RAE award of a 5. So there was a feeling, after this initial burst of people taking the initiative, that everything here was okay...any proposals for change were resisted. They were resisted on the basis that this department has got an Excellent for teaching, it’s got a 5, and [highly regarded professional accreditation]. They said what do you want to change for? What’s broken? You only mend things if they are broken.

Complacency began to set in. They felt that they were above all this external assessment. I think they paid the price for it on the [next] research assessment. I think that if they had gone ahead with teaching assessment, the results might have been a little different. The [accrediting body] changed its education scheme, so all our programmes had to be reviewed in light of the scheme. A lot of people were saying why do we have to do this? Unlike [earlier] they didn’t see it as an opportunity to review what they were doing. There was this feeling that they were now the elite, so why did they have to do this. So there is a double edge to it.

External accountability was also identified as having led to a greater and beneficial organisation of the management of learning and teaching. The following interviewee comment is illustrative of the opinions expressed: *“I think it’s got us to do things better in certain areas. It has organised our approach, our management of teaching and learning, and the debate about teaching and learning, rather differently. We had a very laidback, detached, approach to things. I think we are better at doing those sort of things. I think that is a direct result of having to focus on some of these issues because of QAA.”*

6.2.4 The Beneficial Influence of Institutional Preparation and Reflection

The role of the institution in aiding departmental preparation was generally described as having been a helpful but light touch, with a focus on support rather than instruction. This was widely accepted as being an appropriate stance. The following comment highlights the necessary balance between departmental ownership and institutional overview: *“The feedback from going outside the Department was useful, not so much in the statement of aims and objectives and so on but in continually reinforcing the need for evidence. I think it is good to have an outside voice. I thought that worked reasonably well. I thought it was our responsibility, rightly so, but I think that the amount of support was helpful and not too intrusive.”*

Although several interviewees highlighted, to varying degrees, that the university could take measures to ease the burden on departments, such as by providing statistical data for review documentation, a stronger role for the centre was not sought. For example, an interviewee who had identified deficient aspects in the institution’s review of departmental self-assessment documentation underlined the dangers of changing the current balance: *“In this university I think that there is a lot to be said for the light touch from the centre because I think that did give the department ownership. I’m aware that in other institutions departments see these things centrally and all that happens is that they don’t [have ownership] because they think that it is Registry’s responsibility.”*

Further, commenting on the wider institution-department link, one interviewee highlighted that the influence of external review was that it led to a greater consideration of this relationship: *“...some of it was about linking aims of institutions into aims of faculties into aims of courses and so on. What TQA did was certainly start to focus folk’s view on aligning those things properly.”*

It was widely considered that the university’s approach to institutional overview and departmental responsibility balance was one that sought to encourage ownership rather than compliance but also underlined that with ownership came responsibility. This balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership was evident in the approach to policy implementation being one of guidance rather than instruction: *“...they are steers...Senior officers have a wider view, they’ve seen self-assessment documents from all over the University. They are able to bring a constructive view but it has never been my view that there has been an attempt here to say that this is what you must do.”*

Another interview expanded on the wider rationale for the existing, appropriate, balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership: *“I think in this university we have taken a view that we don’t want to have a compliance culture. We want to have an environment where people own whatever it is that they do and recognise therefore that there are obligations that go along with ownership. We would rather have people reviewing the quality of what they do because they genuinely believed in the importance of doing it rather than doing it because someone in the centre says that boxes in a form must be ticked.”*

6.2.5 The Benefit of Participation as Peer Reviewers

As found in the Institutional Interviews, the general perception was that the institution gently encouraged participation but left the decision to individual academics. Of the four interviewees that participated as Lead Assessors, the majority indicated that they were invited to undertake this role by SHEFC.

Head of Department Interviewees identified a number of reasons for their participation as peer reviewers. Although, it was widely evident that the principal

reason for participation as peer reviewers was to learn about the operation of the process, a number of other factors were present. The following example illustrates a number of points: *“...the department wanted somebody on the inside to bring intelligence back about the way the review process was going to be conducted in [our subject area]...I did have an interest in it and felt that I could maybe learn from the way that other institutions tackled some problems. Also, not wishing to be boastful, I felt that there was maybe something which I could contribute in terms of the overall process.”*

The opportunity for cognate areas to share good practice was identified as being beneficial by several interviewees. One interviewee also underlined the open nature of this aspect: *“I learned from the institutions that I visited. Other departments have learned from things that we do. I think that has been a positive thing and isn't done in a competitive way.”*

Although it was recognised that witnessing the practices of others did in some cases lead to change, it could also serve as a source of confidence that existing practices were at the forefront. For one interviewee this was a key reason for participation: *“...it was really about getting your nose into other departments that you could never do before and in that sense it was reassuring”*. For another interviewee, a detailed knowledge of sector practice, in terms of both institutional and departmental operations, *“allows you to talk with some authority within your own institution. You can talk confidently about what you're doing and about what other people are doing.”*

6.2.6 Enhancement of Focus on a Long-Term Basis

As indicated, there was a perception that SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review raised the profile of learning and teaching and also led to assurance activities becoming more explicit and routine. For example, the change in approach in one department is illustrated by the following comment: *“...we did kind of get into a mindset of self-assessment, aims and objectives, how we were delivering these and where the evidence was to support this”*. Another interviewee described the influence as follows: *“I think there is emphasis...you begin to think in a slightly*

different way and it just becomes the way you do things...I think it's a better way of doing things...I think now it's in with the woodwork, it's a way of working". Case Study Examples 6.3 and 6.4 also provide helpful insights.

Several interviewees provided examples of specific developments that were related to external review. The regular learning and teaching seminars cited in Case Study Example 6.3 are a good illustration of such developments. In another department a Teaching Management Group was established which included a Director of Teaching and a team of people who are responsible for, and report on, *"review, innovation, and quality"* in programmes. Further, it was evident that these practices were actively evolving. In the same department a more recent development was an *"away day for all the staff where the whole day will be talking about teaching, teaching problems, how we can improve our teaching, reviewing the evaluations from the students and so on."*

Although it was widely evident that external review had acted as a catalyst for change, it was consistently underlined that such enhancements were built on an existing focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching. As noted earlier, an existing commitment to teaching and its related issues was widely and strongly emphasised. Although the influence of Funding Council reviews varied, the following comment is reasonably representative of interviewee perceptions: *"the sort of process that we went through maybe gave it a bigger push than if it hadn't happened...[but] it was evolution rather than revolution."*

Further, several interviewees acknowledged the beneficial impact of external review in the form of TQA and Subject Review but underlined the strong influence of professional accreditation on both assurance and enhancement practice. Indeed, one interviewee considered that the impact of TQA would be more readily felt in non-accredited areas: *"A lot of the things that the TQA process was doing, we had been doing for years...The TQA structure wasn't what we had been dealing with but it wasn't a thousand miles away from it...I'm aware that for other subject areas TQA was a shaft of light. That wasn't the case for us."*

Case Study Example 6.3

The Enhancement of an Existing Focus on Quality

Departmental learning and teaching focus *Although we have always taken research very seriously...we also recognise that your reputation isn't just dependent on your research rating, there is also a strong teaching element to that...we've always regarded the two as going hand in hand...*

...Since the days of TQA every year we've had teaching and learning seminars as well as research seminars. We invite people from other parts of the University or indeed from other [universities] to come and explain issues that are of interest to us in teaching. We ask colleagues that have been involved in innovative work in the [department] to do a teaching and learning seminar...So we are giving teaching and research the same level of attention and the same status...

The influence of TQA: *One of the reasons why we started these teaching and learning seminars was to keep the department on-side as far as TQA was concerned. We invited people who had already gone through the TQA exercise to discuss their experience...we made sure that [departmental staff] contributed...So there was ownership across the department...*

...To be fair I think that there was a lot of excellent work going on in [the department] but I think what [TQA] did, and there is an argument that it made us go too far, was that it made us formalise a lot of things that we were already doing and that were almost second nature...

...we did look at other departments for examples of good practice in order to improve what we did...

Post TQA and Pre Subject Review: *We kept the teaching and learning seminars going. The Academic Committee in the department, which was chaired by the Director of Teaching, took on a key role as far as new course and curriculum developments were concerned. It also acted as the body which ensured that people were completing their course and class reviews. I think people recognised that it was something that had to be done. It goes back to this basic point that we take teaching very seriously...and we will do what we can at any time to try to improve the quality. So even if there hadn't been the possibility of further external reviews I think this process would have continued.*

The influence of Subject Review: *...I think as far as Subject Review is concerned the benefits are more about an external agency saying that they have confidence in your standards and that what you do is commendable...we probably thought more about our standards in [the department] than we might otherwise have done, although we've always felt that our standards are good and this has been reflected in external examiners' reports.*

The other thing I would say which was of benefit in terms of this continuous process of enhancement was some of the QAA infrastructure such as Programme Specifications. Although people thought that they were a bureaucratic nightmare and they were difficult to undertake, I think it did make people think seriously about what they were doing...They also recognised that not only was it important for them to think about that, they also had to signpost those things to the student community.

I think that in terms of any gain that we got from Subject Review it would come more from what the QAA, for example with the Benchmark Standards, was setting out as good practice. I think that was reflected in the way that we operated. It made us think more about how we were delivering our programmes, what our standards were, and what we wanted students to achieve. I think that was quite significant for us and it did lead lots of staff to think more about the outcomes. If you look at how [the department] has responded, with handbooks which have a clear articulation of what the classes are about, there is a thoughtful process going on there.

The learning experience: *If you take learning outcomes and the idea of skills-based as well as knowledge-based outcomes, I think one of the things that we did, which we had always done but I think we took it even more seriously, was the induction of students, to make sure that they had the right type of skills from day one... That was reflected in some of the Benchmark Standards... It was obviously influenced by Dearing and Garrick, so we can't ignore that element, but also if you look at the Learning Outcomes approach that the QAA has put forward, I think that did have an impact and also benefited the students...*

The influence on an existing focus *...Had we not [undergone TQA] there is no doubt that my own department would have continued its process of improvement but it might have been less urgent and might have had a lower priority. External scrutiny did have a focusing element to it; people did give it a priority which it might not otherwise have had. Things might have happened but perhaps not as detailed and perhaps not as quickly.*

6.3 The Influence of TQA and Subject Review on a Culturally Distinct Sector

Given that the Head of Department Interviews were conducted in the form of a single institution case study, it was not appropriate to pursue the nature of the impact on the sector. An opportunity to corroborate such aspects of Institutional Interview data was afforded by the Sector Interviews

However, within the Institutional Interviews it was evident there was varied opinion on whether the operation of external review had brought cognate areas closer together, and it was felt that this was a relevant point to pursue. The Head of Department Interviewees broadly indicated that there was little influence of bringing such departments together. However, this was primarily because a divide did not exist or that the cognate area departments were so specialised that further contact was not appropriate.

6.4 Impediments to and Options for Continued Focus Enhancement

The data gathered from the Head of Department Interviews corroborate the Institutional Interviews support of the proposition that negative perspectives strongly countered the benefits gained from TQA and Subject Review and that for future external accountability approaches to have a positive influence ownership must be instilled with subject level academics.

6.4.1 The Fragile Acceptance of External Accountability

Although views varied as to the need for continued external accountability, there was a general acceptance that there would be a continued element of externality in addition to external examining and professional accreditation. For example, one interviewee considered that experience of TQA and Subject Review meant that the increased internal review associated with a third phase of external review would be more readily accepted: *"...if we hadn't gone through TQA and everything else, we'd have looked at this [new Institutional Review methodology] and thought where is all this coming from? But I think that we're more used to that in terms of processes, documentation, and internal accountability"*. However, acceptance of external accountability was a question of balance, as illustrated by the following comment

from another interviewee: *“Although I have problems with some of the operational arrangements...My view on TQA is that it was right that we went through this exercise.”*

The acceptance of external review was also related to the level of acceptance of accountability. Although views varied, it was evident that perhaps departments that were used to professional accreditation processes were less hostile to the notion of additional externality but more aware of the duplication burden of preparing separate submissions for similar purposes. On balance, although benefits of Funding Council accountability were highlighted, there was a preference for accreditation. For example, one interviewee considered the professional review process to be more positive given that it was *“marginally more developmental and less judgmental.”*

6.4.2 Negative Aspects of TQA and Subject Review

Interviewees highlighted a number of detrimental aspects of external review processes. Indeed one interviewee was of the opinion that *“there were benefits but I think that they were outweighed by the bureaucracy at the end of the day”*. Case Study Example 6.4, detailing the perspectives of another interviewee, illustrates a number of detriments alongside beneficial aspects of external review.

As evidenced in the Institutional Interview data, the amount of time and work required for SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review preparations was widely identified as the most negative aspect. Although views varied, several interviewees strongly criticised the TQA process for being *“bureaucratic”*. The following comment illustrates this perception: *“The problem with TQA was that it was so consuming. My life in the year before TQA was preparing self-assessment documents, despite all the delegation that you do. It was not only my life but also for four or five other people in the department it was almost a full time job.”*

Of the three interviewees with direct experience of an actual (non-pilot) Subject Review assessment, opinions varied as to its value. Case Study Example 6.3 illustrates positive points but perceptions from the other interviewees were, to

varying extents, negative. Indeed one interviewee, who had acknowledged benefits of both TQA specifically and external review generally, considered Subject Review to be *“a waste of paper”*. Expanding upon this view, the interviewee stated that: *“It was bureaucracy...I was involved in [the development work relating to it]. You could see it growing, that’s why I pulled out. I could see this just getting out of hand and becoming more and more prescriptive...Everybody was recognising at quite an early stage that it was getting out of hand.”*

However, another interviewee noted that the increased scope of the wider Academic Process was foisted upon the QAA. Whilst the Funding Councils had required a process to fulfil the role of TQA, the agenda broadened after *“various Government ministers and others had made comments about standards in higher education, so that started a hare running.”*

Returning to external review in general, several interviewees highlighted that in their experience it was too compliance orientated. For example, one interviewee considered that it *“stifled innovation of any kind because what people had to do was to conform in some way to what TQA was expecting”*. Another interviewee highlighted that focus on conformity as a downside because *“it doesn’t really matter if you’re doing the same, there are lots of good ways of doing things.”*

Several interviewees raised concerns regarding unfairness or inconsistencies in reviews, with one interviewee considering a particular judgement to be *“a stitch-up”*. The concerns of another interviewee illustrates similar disappointment: *“...we felt that some of these [comments] essentially were just not valid or based on very, very flimsy evidence...We got things that were factually incorrect in the report and even though we were able to convince the Lead Assessor that they had got it wrong, the score didn’t change. So I think that casts some question marks over the credibility of the process.”*

Case Study Example 6.4

Benefits and Detriments of External Review Processes and Methodologies

Perspective on benefits and detriments: *Actually at the time the process of TQA was seen to be an unbelievable burden, an unnecessary interference, and goodness knows what else. So it obviously made whoever was the TQA person's job pretty miserable. A lot of that still pervades today I have to say. I personally, and a number of others I believe, felt that we learnt a hell of a lot through the initial TQA exercises and we did put an awful lot of processes into place which have been positive as far as the student experience and the staff experience is concerned.*

I'm not exactly sure whether all of that positiveness could not have occurred by having a better culture or better leadership in terms of Heads of Department or senior officers rather than having this bureaucratic process thrust upon them. It's almost like Thatcher in the early eighties. We had to have Thatcher to at least get us moving, the trouble was we had her far too long. I think the same applies to TQA. We had to have it to get us moving. Perhaps it has been diluted sufficiently that we don't see it as that much of a burden anymore.

Focus and burden: *...I think one of the major benefits was that it actually brought teaching as a requirement for staff to the fore. People actually realised that somebody somewhere might actually be finding out that they weren't putting a lot of effort into this or that they weren't doing something. I know a lot of my colleagues would say 'how dare you say that? We always do our best', but I'm not exactly sure. I think there was more of a feeling of pride, more of a feeling of a requirement to work on teaching. So I think it emphasised the role of teaching more. I'm worried that it perhaps emphasised it too much and then we suddenly find RAE creating just as important a problem. We allowed TQA to come in and then found RAE at the same time. It was a bit too much of a heavy load.*

In terms of specifics with quality assurance, I think that accountability is the big one for individual teachers. To actually know that what they are doing, putting across, they are going to get feedback on it which they may or may not agree with but there is going to be a whole lot more people looking at it and maybe saying that you're not doing it as well as this, that, or whatever. I think that was beneficial and increased the emphasis. The other way is I think actually getting processes crystal clear because tightening up on process, making sure that we crossed the Ts and dotted the Is was important, in the past it was a little bit more lax and it has tightened that up.

Maybe a downside of that is a lack of flexibility. We are now into a system where if you make a change it takes you forever to actually do that change and you've got to think whether that impacts on other aspects, etc, and that is a difficult thing.

...There has been a lot of talk about burden and I think that is probably going to be the one theme that will come through from most people, particularly at Head of Department level. The burden was huge. I think the burden could have been handled differently in terms of the centre having fewer requirements on individual departments to produce the documentation.

Negative aspects of TQA competition: *There was a huge amount of competition associated particularly with RAE but also with TQA. I learnt that to my cost to a certain extent in terms of reviewing other departments. It's a long time ago and it's all over now but I felt myself that there was a feeling that you've done us down as a Reviewer, we deserve more than this, and because we all knew each other from the relative departments, that brought in an atmosphere that wasn't conducive to getting on with each other. So competition doesn't necessarily breed the best climate.*

Disappointment with the QAA approach: *I started being quite enthusiastic about the ideas of output standards, benchmarking, etc. I was originally involved with [a professional body]. I gave up in disgust after a while because I felt that there was so much bean-counting and not enough development work. It wasn't a means or a mechanism for improvement; it was just simply a means of measuring...*

...I think there is a feeling that the QA process should have been more developmental after the initial TQA process and put more emphasis on improving teaching rather than simply measuring it and providing minimum levels. There should be some encouraging of maximum levels rather than minimum levels and I don't think that's there.

The feeling of a lack of trust, with some review teams assuming guilt rather than innocence, was also often highlighted. For example, one interviewee highlighted the detrimental result of mistrust between reviewers and departments: *“one of the problems with TQA was that it was often approached by some of the Assessors with an assumption that departments had something to hide, which may or may not have been the case, but if it is approached like that it becomes very negative”*. Case Study Example 6.5 illustrates opinions regarding review team preconceptions.

Case Study Example 6.5

Research-Teaching Focus and Review Team Preconceptions

Research-Teaching Focus: *The short answer is that it is balanced. [The department] has always been a five in the RAEs...So we've always had this reputation of being a hot-shot research department. Having said that we've also attracted lots of undergraduate students, our courses have always been remarkably popular.*

When I came here fourteen years ago it was made very clear that we are a research department but we are also a teaching department and you will also be expected to take a significant administrative burden. The deal was that everyone was in the same boat. What you'll find in some departments is that you've got researchers and teachers. Given that in this department the core [departmental] staff is only ever about twelve, thirteen, and the vast number of students, you do teach. The deal was that all professors and senior staff had an equal load with the most junior. We have a teaching grid and a marking grid as an equalising mechanism.

So the short answer is that although we are regarded as a good research department, research is only one element amongst others. It is not the main priority; it is one of the priorities. Having said that, there are trade-offs. When members of staff are successful in getting ESRC grants or other awards, they are able to buy time out of teaching to do research. The significance of that is that you get young, new staff in who do lots of teaching and are very good and are very keen but also they are expected to do research as well. That's a long way of saying that the priority is both research and teaching.

The Review Experience: *[The Review Team] came with this mindset, which gets us back to where we started, talking about research and teaching, that [this] was a research department and couldn't care less about teaching. All the time they were trying to say that we were interested in research and not bothered about teaching. All of the time the evidence was there that although we were interested in research we were also good teachers. They thought that all these professors couldn't be teaching. So in terms of documentation we were able to show them the teaching grid that showed who was doing what and the amount of class contact that they had. We had that anyway but procedures like that were necessary for TQA and there was a lot of documentation which was basically me sending a memo to somebody saying what we were doing, simply so that we could show that we were doing it. I think that's what ground people down; it really got to you in the end.*

Several interviewees also highlighted the competitive nature of external review to be a detriment. For example, although participation as peer reviewers was principally to learn about the process and the practice of others, one interviewee underlined that *“if you are not actively involved in the process I think that would increase the chance of*

being shafted". Case Study Example 6.4 also highlights negative aspects of competition, from the perspective of another interviewee.

6.4.3 The RAE, Research-Teaching Focus, and Promotion

It was widely agreed that the existence of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review acted as a counterweight to the focus on research performance and the RAE. One interviewee highlighted the importance of external review in this particular context: *"I think without that the [institutional focus on learning and teaching] would have drifted for sure and to the detriment of the student experience...it has kept the student as customer. It has kept a fairly strong focus on that and I think a check within the balance of activities."*

It was evident that departments varied regarding their particular balance of research-teaching focus. Views varied from feeling that an appropriate balance had been achieved to a desire to *"see the balance more research orientated"* or preference that *"the research side didn't have to be so emphasised"*. Regardless of the preference, as highlighted earlier, there was a focus on providing high quality teaching. The following comment highlights this: *"The Department always prided itself on the teaching side even though it was highly research active."*

However, it was also evident that there was a continuing pressure to perform well in the research arena, and specifically the RAE. The following comment is a helpful illustration: *"In the final analysis it's easier to get funding through the teaching mechanism, in that it's basically just student numbers, than it is through the RAE mechanism, which is competitive and quality driven. So any institution is going to emphasise the RAE rather than any teaching audit"*. In Case Study Example 6.6 another interviewee provides an insight into the pressure to perform well in the RAE.

Although a balance was sought in departments regarding research and teaching, there was a clear understanding that research played a far greater role regarding promotion success. One interviewee described the situation as follows: *"The perception is...that there are sort of golden shares which are research driven"*. Another interviewee

provided further detail on this point in that although the department was focused on delivering high quality teaching and research, the attitude of the staff was more orientated to research: *“Basically that’s because they believe that the rewards system in the University is more favourable towards research...if you look at the way in which people are treated for promotion, they don’t believe that teaching/administration/management/research are all taken into account and all given equal weighting...Therefore they believe that if you are to advance your career you’ve got to be out front on research rather than on teaching.”*

Case Study Example 6.6

The Pressure of the RAE

In this department, it was emphasised that it had a strong focus on teaching activities even though it was highly research active. Whilst there was a strong desire for a discipline-based, enhancement-focused, approach, given that a benefit of external review was that *“we’ve all got the message that teaching is important”*, the need for a counterweight to the pressures of the RAE was recognised:

People could sink back. This is the poison of RAE. That pressure at the end of the day will always be greater because getting a good rating from QAA is not going to do you any good in terms of your peers...

The RAE undoubtedly looms large. One of my colleagues said that our department couldn’t cope with a 5. Although teaching was never much discussed, the assumption was that everybody would try to be as good a teacher as possible while at the same time trying to produce research as best they could. What poisoned the Department was the 5 in the RAE and the reactions to that. What you got was certain staff feeling that they were the 5s and that they were the ones that got the 5, and therefore they should be protected because they would be the ones that would get the 5 the next time and that this was what mattered. So immediately this was saying that teaching was a lesser priority. That was a poison that I had never heard in the Department before.

Although it was evident that the research focus on promotions had a strong cultural aspect, several interviewees highlighted that the difficulty in evaluating the quality of teaching may have been a factor in stalling greater change. The following comments illustrates this point of view: *“...to get any concrete evidence on teaching performance that you could use as a promotional criteria, even to Senior Lecturer, where excellence in any of the areas is acceptable, is very difficult. By contrast, research is easy to quantify at any level”*. Case Study Example 6.7 details the research-teaching balance in one department and the accompanying views on promotion.

Case Study Example 6.7

Research-Teaching Balance and the Actuality of Promotion

Research-Teaching Focus: *Certainly I think we are coming from a direction that has been pretty strong on teaching. That has been very much a strength but it does mean that research has been seen as a weakness so we are now shifting the balance a bit more to, I guess, the conventional balance with more research. It is driven not so much by external things but by the resources that you've got and the interests of your staff. We've got a number of new appointments specifically to strengthen the research. At the end of the day there is a very strong feeling that it is teaching activities that pay the mortgage, if you like, and are absolutely essential.*

...Particularly in these very difficult financial times a recognition of teaching, in the sense of attracting good students, is absolutely vital. I don't think we're out of step at all on that one.

Promotion Actuality: *By and large your statement in the summary has got it right. With the best will in the world it is still very difficult to get promotion on teaching only, that's absolutely right. I think one of the aspects of that is, and I think this is reasonable enough, that staff say they are good teachers. All staff say that they are good teachers. It is in fact very difficult, and I think everyone recognises it, to evaluate it numerically in the way that research can be against number of publications and things like that. One or two people can be active in teaching by doing the same kind of things, going to conferences and developing courses. Just to say that 'I am a good teacher', how do we really evaluate that? I've listened with interested to the new criteria for promotion. It sounds very much like the old criteria to be honest. It will be interesting to see if it really makes any difference. I think your statements in here that even where there is a genuine recognition of the importance of teaching, I think that is the case in [this university]; it is still not seen to be the route to promotion.*

6.4.4 The Need for A Revised Approach

Although the contribution of external accountability was recognised, there was a view from departments involved in QAA Subject Review that there was waning acceptance of a continued focus at the subject level. One reason was the volume of QAA documentation to be digested: *"You certainly were inundated with [QAA documents] and the idea that somehow you should be on the QAA website all the time waiting for the next one."*

Another factor was the knowledge that the sector-wide approach to external accountability was going to change in the short-term: *"There was never wild enthusiasm for the [Subject Review] process. We knew that when we were going into it that the likelihood was that we were going down a dead-end. That became clearer and clearer as the process came along and really there was a feeling that we've got to do it because we had been directed to by the University management."*

There was a widely held, but not universal, desire for an end to the detailed review of subject level provision. Within this there was a view that the benefits from such

detailed review had been accrued and there was now a need for a revised approach. For example, during a discussion of the value of external review one interviewee stated: *“I think I know what you’re saying there, that actually having the process in place does bring about a process of change which is continuing. I would kind of agree with that, I think that’s reasonably true...[but] you don’t need to keep examining the entrails in detail”*. Another interviewee, who considered that external review was introduced because *“the government at the time were after four percent or whatever it was of recalcitrant institutions”* and thus *“saddled”* the sector with external review, felt that although there were clear benefits such as making practices explicit and routine, the actual process *“went overboard.”*

6.4.5 Trust, Accountability and Ownership

A key element of a revised approach was that the new process would have to place ownership in the hands of the departments. For, example, the question of trust in departmental practices was highlighted by one interviewee: *“Are they mature responsible adults that can be trusted or are they small boys and girls who if you turn your back will be throwing balls through windows? I would suggest that if people are going to believe in a process it has to be a process that treats them like adults”*. A failure to develop a trusting relationship would result in *“a very negative, bureaucratic process in which there are no real winners at the end of the day. It becomes a set of hoops to be jumped through.”*

For another interviewee, the importance of having an appropriate approach was also relevant to the institution-department quality assurance relationship: *“If it becomes too bureaucratic, departments will wash their hands of it – ‘you gave me this checklist, I’ve ticked everything off, things have gone pear-shaped, it’s your fault’.”*

However, several interviewees highlighted the importance of retaining an appropriate form of accountability. For example, the following comment highlights the danger of no externality: *“I have no doubt that without external pressure universities are not really capable of change. That’s the problem, they can very quickly become moribund institutions....”*

It was apparent that external review could be both beneficial and accepted by the academic community if it was perceived to be relevant and thus fostered ownership of the system by subject level academics. One interviewee considered that the external review had successfully underlined the importance of assuring the quality of provision but that an ownership focused approach was needed: *“What should happen now is that it needs to be pulled back more into the hands of the discipline. The generalised stuff is now counter-productive; people have learned to tick the boxes. If it’s going to have a future you’ve go to somehow relate it very strictly to the discipline. Basically talk to one another and swap information. It is interesting how ready people are to do this...That’s the future. The generalised stuff about learning is going to get nowhere.”*

6.4.6 Institutional Rather than Subject Level Review

In expanding upon their views on the way forward regarding the external accountability of learning and teaching provision, it should be noted that Head of Department Interviews were carried out after the Institutional Interviewee phase and as such these interviewees had a slightly clearer indication of what the new methodology would be.

The majority of interviewees were in favour of a likely move to institutional review. However, a key point was that an appropriate balance between institutional and departmental responsibility should operate. Firstly, it was important that departments did not perceive that the institution had sole responsibility for satisfying external accountability. For example, one interviewee considered that the end of the external Funding Council review of cognate areas could have a negative effect: *“I can see the dangers. There is a view that Subject Review is dead and therefore it is really the higher mechanisms that will be looked at.”*

Further, another interviewee, who considered that the benefits accrued from subject level review, in terms of the renewed focus on teaching and its quality assurance, would be maintained, noted the dangers of a system that focused purely on the higher

level: *“There is a recognition that there are certain things we need to do and we need to do them better. I think that will be maintained. How it will be maintained will really depend on the relationship of individual departments to the new Institutional Audit process that is coming in. If that is totally centrally operated and removed, and if there is a very clear indication that our lives will not be directly affected by it, I suspect we might get lazy again.”*

A second key concern was how the institution would approach the interaction with departments regarding external review obligations. The following interviewee comments illustrates the realisation that departments will have a role to play: *“The assumption is that the University has to take a much more active, local, role rather than the sort of gentleman’s club type of faculty reviews that we have historically conducted, which are fairly innocuous and fairly bland. I suspect that the University at the end of the day is going to have to dig a lot deeper at departmental level...in order for us to put forward a credible institutional picture, presumably the building blocks are going to have to be in place.”*

However, it was noted the difficult internalisation of external requirements would again require the achievement of ownership. For one interviewee, the failure to achieve this would mean a *“danger that it then creates this gulf between us and them when we should be working together to help one another.”*

For another interviewee, a failure to create an appropriate institution-department quality assurance relationship could actually limit academic ownership and have detrimental results: *“I think there is a role for the centre but at the end of the day the departments deliver the programmes and staff the teaching, therefore it is important that they feel some ownership of it, and that they feel that they have some control. If it’s all done by the centre they won’t like that but it’s also an easy excuse from them, it enables them to avoid responsibility.”*

The difficulty of the task of creating an internal mechanism that is accepted by the academic community, but also sufficient to satisfy external accountability

obligations, is highlighted by the following comment: *“What you have to be careful of in the institution is that people just jump through the hoops...[but] you can’t allow a faculty to let a n’er-do-well away with it...they have to be made aware that this is serious. It can’t be tokenistic and it can’t be heavy-handed, you need a balance of something that is developmental but isn’t about constantly filling out forms just for the sake of it.”*

6.5 Summary

This chapter has shown that the data gathered from the Head of Department Interviews has, where relevant, corroborated the evidence obtained from the Institutional Interviews. Further, these interviews have supplemented the initial data to provide a greater level of understanding of the impact of the SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review processes.

The results of the Head of Department Interviews indicate that the operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities acted as a catalyst in the enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, on a long-term basis.

However, it is also evident that these benefits are strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of external accountability processes. Further, if the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving learning and teaching is to continue to be positively influenced, on a long-term basis, by external accountability processes, an appropriate balance must be constructed that instils ownership with subject level academics while ensuring a level of institutional overview sufficient to satisfy external accountability.

The Sector Interviews, the results of which are presented in the following chapter, support and supplement the findings of the Head of Department Interviews, set out above, and the Institutional Interviews, set out in Chapter Five. The conclusion to this thesis, set out in Chapter Eight, will discuss the research propositions and

research results in the context of public policy developments and the current literature.

Chapter Seven

Sector Interviews

7.1 Introduction

As noted in Chapter Four, the Sector Interviewee selection was based on breadth of experience in senior sector roles regarding the 1992-2002 period that the study focuses on. The Sector Interviewees included a Principal from a post-1992 university, a Principal from a pre-1992 university, the Head of the QAA Scottish Office, and the SHEFC Deputy Director (Quality and Learning Innovation).

Accordingly, the Sector Interviews provide an opportunity to triangulate much of the data gathered from the Institutional Interview and Head of Department Interview stages. Additionally, they also provided valuable insight into the interface between institutions and the wider sector regarding the impact and development of quality assessment and accountability. Accordingly, with the data from the Sector Interviews corroborating that from the preceding stages, this chapter addresses in greater detail the aforementioned interface and the way forward for external quality assurance in Scotland.

As detailed in Chapter Four, Sector Interviewees were provided with a summary (see Annex I) of the research results drawn from the Institutional Interviews. Sector interviewees were asked to consider the relevance of these findings to their experience and invited to focus on specific aspects as they felt appropriate. Given that the summary of the Institutional Interviews covered a significant amount of points, the Sector Interviews neither individually nor collectively addressed each issue.

In keeping with the methodological approach of the study, the aim was to gain as much insight as possible from the data gathering. Thus the aim was not to seek consensus amongst Sector Interviewees but rather to explore their individual perceptions in relation to their experience. Accordingly, the illustrations used in this chapter often represent those of an individual respondent rather than the group of

participants. However, the tone and representation of the chapter is collective, given the overall consistency of views expressed.

Fuller quotes than presented in the Institutional Interview and Head of Department Interview chapters are used to give additional insight. This is as a substitute for Case Study Examples, which could not be provided given that their detail could breach confidentiality owing to the, justifiably, small number of Sector Interviewees. For the same reason, indications of the broad source of the quote are not provided. Given that the comments of the Sector Interviewees did not challenge the findings of the Institutional Interview stage but rather corroborated and often expanded upon them, the opportunity, in line with the adopted methodology, was taken to explore in greater detail views on the way forward of external assessment. This ties in with the strong views from Institutional Interviewees and Head of Department Interviewees that the nature of future external quality assurance processes was a vitally important topic. Accordingly, some additional sections appear in the chapter, exploring themes that are not covered to the same extent, and not specifically demarcated, in the chapters dealing with the Institutional Interviews and the Head of Department Interviews.

Although SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review are viewed by this thesis as an external accountability continuum in terms of the 1992-2002 period, the individual processes are distinguished where appropriate. For ease of reference the points covered in this section follow the same order as those set out in Chapter Five and Chapter Six.

7.2 The Catalytic Influence of TQA and Subject Review

The data gathered from the Sector Interviews supported the proposition that TQA and Subject Review had a catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. The four detailed interviews focused on a number of key points, as set out in the following sections.

7.2.1 Performance, Awareness and Leadership

The importance of performing well in the external assessments such as TQA takes on additional significance when considering that this cross-sector impact occurred even though the pre-1992 and post-1992 universities had cultural differences regarding the balance between teaching and research. One interviewee described the background as follows:

“If you think about the cultural difference in teaching, if you go back to before 1992, the difference was one of a culture of informality in the old universities as against a culture which was formal and structured in the new universities. So far as the research and teaching balance is concerned, the research interest has become more prominent in the new universities than it was.”

Another interviewee underlined that although research had a strong focus, the level to which individual academics were involved in this task varied:

“Whereas everybody is paid to teach, the research funding is much more selective and although I think every academic would say that research is part of being in higher education, the extent to which it impinges upon your professional life varies between universities depending on available time, resources, and teaching loads...”

Although it was emphasised that staff, departments, and institutions across the sector took their teaching activities seriously, it was highlighted that a key factor leading to the importance placed upon performing well in external assessments was the impact that results could have on departmental and institutional reputations. This point and the procedural consequences of it, are highlighted by the following interviewee comment:

“I think it made a big difference because most institutions recognised that this was critical to the reputation of the university, therefore

departments couldn't be allowed to do what they liked. So if a document was going forward most universities that I know recognised that before it went to SHEFC it had to have some sort of approval from a university body, whether it was a committee or whatever. That had to be done. So it was scrutinised with a view to making sure that it was believed to be a good document."

The value of having staff participate as reviewers in the external processes was highlighted by the following Sector Interviewee comment: *"There were a few institutions that didn't take that view [of the value of participation] and I think others felt that they had missed out because of that...the incentive was clearly there."*

As evidenced in the Institutional Interviews and the Head of Department Interviews, confidence in institutions across the sector was high regarding the quality of learning and teaching provision. The following comments highlight that at the outset of TQA there were preconceptions about the value and focus of the work of institutions formerly from different sides of the Binary Line:

"There was a kind of arrogance among what became the new universities, that they were good at teaching. That was arrogance; it wasn't necessarily true. They had systems and procedures in place, particularly for the validation exercises, but didn't look at the actual process of teaching. A lot of people in the old universities were actually very committed teachers and were very good at what they did. So for every researcher that couldn't be bothered turning up for the students, there were two or three who put the effort into teaching. Of course they didn't need much effort because the average teaching load was much lower."

It was recognised that until the advent of TQA, some institutions, and within them faculties and departments, had been introvert in terms of approaches to quality assurance or definition of practices. According to one interviewee, change came

from the need to react to the demands of TQA: “...we became more articulate about it. I have a very clear understanding that we all have tacit knowledge. You have to make it explicit...” Further, the same interviewee highlighted that other elements of satisfying the process also had an impact in that “being more reflective on the activities was terribly important.”

The common response to TQA was an increased institutional focus on quality assurance, which led to the review and revision of existing practices. This often meant a greater central overview of faculty and departmental practices or the introduction of increased ‘externality’ with cross faculty participation in hitherto closed faculty meetings and reviews.

A key aim inherent in such moves was the encouragement of positive change whilst remaining conscious that for this to happen “there had to be ownership out there”. The necessity to balance ownership with an appropriate level of central overview meant that university leadership was often vital in raising awareness and in shaping and driving the “functional management” of new or enhanced internal quality assurance processes.

7.2.2 Changes in Approach to Sector Discussions

As well as the development of institutional awareness and approaches, the sector as a whole evolved in terms of how it collectively interfaced with external assessment discussions. It was evident that the intensity of participation in methodology consultations increased and that there was a clear move to exercise concerted pressure.

The Teaching Quality Forum was considered to be the starting point and driver of concerted university approaches to sector quality assurance consultations. The following interview comment is a helpful insight:

“...That’s how I got to know everyone. I think we tried to get a commonality of response and a common understanding. We ganged up,

though still not terribly effectively, and we developed a degree of common understanding and support. We met regularly and it was terribly useful. You would get [pre-1992 universities] talking to [post-1992 universities] about it.”

There was recognition that this concerted approach developed over the 1992-2002 period of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review operation, and more recently the Enhancement Led Institutional Review consultations. The following comment highlights the rise in concerted and focused responses to consultations, the role of the Teaching Quality Forum and the existence of a cadre of staff involved in external sector and internal institutional matters:

“That’s partly playing the game...realising that [there is] much more clout if [universities] can deliver a unified response...I don’t mean that it is choreographed, it’s that there has clearly been some discussion behind the scenes, rightly and properly...[there are] structures, like the Teaching Quality Forum, that give a voice to that layer of people. It’s also, as your paper points out, that there is that layer of people, quality professionals, in the sector, that there wasn’t in 1992. I think they have increasingly a tactical or strategic role within institutions. A lot of that is about talking to colleagues and figuring out ways of doing things.”

The collective approach by institutions certainly gave the sector a strong hand in discussions, aided by the continuing solid performance in external assessments. The following comment, comparing discussions on TQA with those regarding the emerging ELIR process, illustrates the extent to which the level of genuine dialogue between the sector and SHEFC has increased:

“When SHEFC was set up it immediately had to put in a quality assessment regime, that was part of the Act...there was a lot of pressure on SHEFC to get a system in place...I would argue that the amount of consultation with the institutions on TQA was frankly pretty small, there

was very little what I would call genuine consultation. The Funding Council in that initial phase had to drive it and did drive it. In the most recent phase there has been much more consultation and ...[this] involved the sector and others in a way which was unusually open...which ensured that many of the concerns of the sector were taken on board. So there was a completely different approach by the Funding Council at that latter stage that allowed, I think, a more genuinely consultative approach to be taken. Arguably there was more time available to do that.”

7.2.3 Enhancement of Focus on a Long-Term Basis

There was a strong view that the external accountability of learning and teaching did have a positive impact on the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. One Sector Interviewee commented on the positive impact on internal mechanisms across the sector:

“...the first round of TQA did make a difference, I have no doubt about that at all. I think the big reason it made a difference is because for the first time, certainly for the non-CNAA institutions and in that particular way for the CNAA institutions, there was external accountability for teaching and learning, which they never had before. In many institutions there was little effective internal accountability.”

The influence not only brought an increased focus to internal accountability processes but also applied to the learning and teaching practices of departments and individual academics. One interviewee highlighted the link between assessment and the lasting revision of practices:

“The very exercise of going through [TQA] meant that people had to attend to what they were doing, they had to think about what they were doing. However inconvenient it may sometimes have been, they actually did it. If you knew that TQA was coming it made you think that, for

example, the book list should be up-to-date. It created an ethos that perhaps there should be an annual cycle of doing things.”

It was acknowledged that there were concerns about the operation and content of the process but underlined that despite these a positive and considerable influence was felt. One interviewee highlighted the contribution of subject level accountability:

“I’m willing to stand up and say that I believe that the fact that drop-out rates have not gone up significantly over the last ten years, despite the increase in student numbers, is down to more emphasis by universities on giving people a proper induction on how to teach and TQA.”

7.3 The Influence of TQA and Subject Review on a Culturally Distinct Sector

The data gathered from the Sector Interviews supported the proposition that the influence of TQA and Subject Review had been felt within culturally distinct universities across the Scottish sector.

Interviewees highlighted the influence that external review, particularly SHEFC TQA, had on bringing the enlarged post binary-line sector closer together, certainly on academic quality and assurance matters. The following interviewee comment is an insightful illustration:

“I think that is probably true. It certainly created a context where there was a feeling of everyone bringing something to the table. The post-1992 universities clearly had their CNNA experience. The pre-1992 universities had the experience of a different kind of organisational structure in relation to quality assurance. I think there was a genuine feeling of learning from both sides...The ending of the Binary Line and the creation of a common framework for quality assurance did bring folk round a table where there wasn’t a feeling of ‘them’ and ‘us’, no matter who you said the ‘them’ was. It did create a context where people not only occasionally sat round tables but actually very frequently sat round

tables, and the [Teaching Quality] Forum is a good example of that and the Teaching and Learning Committees. I think there is a lot to that and it is very helpful.”

Another interviewee considered that the interaction that developed across the sector as a result of TQA was positive and fostered a better understanding of the work of others. This process was aided by the small size of the Scottish sector:

“It was very good for people to mix in that way and gain respect for one another. I think it was a very positive time. One of the big advantages in Scotland is that we have a small system, so there was much more mixing immediately than there was south of the border...That mixing in TQA was very important and I think very positive.”

For one interviewee, the operation of the same system across the sector and the correspondingly similar preparatory work led to *“huge convergence...in the way in which the way we go about the business in the university sector”*. The extent of the convergence, or perhaps the common spirit amongst institutions, and how much this changed, is perhaps best summed up by the comment of another interviewee: *“I do see the sector acting as a sector far more closely. I deliberately talk in those terms because in the past we didn’t talk about the ‘sector’”*. Of course, this process was influenced by a number of factors and not just the external assessment of learning and teaching.

From a learning and teaching perspective, convergence in the sector was also considered in the context of its cultural impact. Regarding quality assurance, one interviewee considered that the learning process across the Scottish sector had led it to become more unified than elsewhere in the UK, fostering a willingness to communicate and develop a partnership approach:

“So is all this coming together? I think it is part and parcel of the debate that the sector has created in Scotland and is in itself a learning process

for everyone involved. I think it is that kind of process that has helped to create a common culture...I think there is a Scottish culture...the feeling is different working in Scotland from working elsewhere in the UK. I'm sure part and parcel of this, which you have effectively put your finger on, is the creation of a single culture. I don't think it is the pre-92s joining the post-92s or the post-92s joining the pre-92s, I think it is all of the players creating a new culture and being actively involved in creating that new culture."

Indeed, the opportunity for convergence was highlighted by the following Sector Interviewee comment:

"...one of the encouraging things, which I know is mentioned in your paper...is that when you get a group of people round a table and they are discussing it, I don't think we ever got a sharp divergence of views between the old and new universities on issues to do with quality assurance. There was always a good consensus reached because the issues are the same. There may be some cultural differences but they don't actually have a big impact on teaching."

7.4 Impediments to and Options for Continued Focus Enhancement

The data gathered from the interviews supported the proposition that negative perspectives strongly countered the benefits gained from SHEFC TQA and Subject Review and that for future external accountability approaches to have a continuing beneficial influence they must instil ownership with subject level academics.

7.4.1 Fragile Acceptance, Negative Aspects and the Need for Change

Interviewees recognised that negative perspectives of the issues such as the burden and nature of subject level review were strongly felt in the sector. In relation to this, one interviewee highlighted a long-term and ultimately limiting difficulty with TQA was its, perhaps initially necessary, authoritarian approach:

“It seemed to me, and I think there is reasonable evidence for it, that one of the problems with TQA was that it created a culture that meant that TQA was something that was done to people and they had very little influence over the process and outcomes, and absolutely no influence over what was done with these outcomes. To the extent that that’s correct, it strikes me that those are the ingredients for a system that is bound to come to a sticky end...You can’t run a kind of dictatorial inspection regime for more than a limited period...All in all that was a major problem with TQA. Perhaps it has to be like that the first time you introduce an external quality assurance regime, I don’t know.”

Although the benefits of the TQA and Subject Review processes were consistently recognised, it was highlighted that over time institutions learned the requirements of the mechanisms and that *“you could manage the results up”*. However, another interviewee indicated that although this was case, the process of self-assessment and reflection remained beneficial:

“Of course as time went on it became a show. That is always the problem with a system of that kind. That said, even that effort led to you work out where you had to put on a show after identifying something wasn’t quite good enough.”

It was apparent that a second cycle of TQA would have had a reduced impact. One interviewee considered that although the operation of the process had a positive impact, the continuance of such a system would not have been appropriate and accordingly would not have been successful:

“[TQA] made a big difference, I’m almost certain...The process of going through it and having to think about these questions, rather than the process itself and the intrinsic merits of the process, probably makes a difference. Where that kind of strategy fails, and why I think it only can work once, is you have to build that kind of strategy much more into day-

to-day practice so that it becomes part and parcel of routine academic work...If you go on relying on these external processes, academics are very bright people...and learn to play games and it does become a game. Actually what you need to do is support the process of change in internal cultures, those in the centre and faculties and departments that are doing this on a regular basis. Students and colleagues hold you to account not some external body."

There were negative perceptions of the QAA period, with the methodology considered too broad or to have been implemented in too short a timescale. If pressure for a swift and comprehensive implementation had been restrained, a better environment might have been fostered. The following interviewee comment is illustrative of this view:

"In retrospect I think everyone could have gained more from the process had there been more preparation...I think it could have been better, more supportive, and more helpful had there been a more relaxed introduction to it, which another year would have provided. I think that's undoubtedly correct."

Another interviewee, who concurred with the other interviewees that there was a need for a methodology that would support internal development and the building of assurance and enhancement strategies into day-to day practice, considered that the nature of Subject Review was such that despite creating fewer burdens than TQA, it shared similar weakness:

"The first year of Subject Review was difficult, QAA had a lot to learn and got quite a lot wrong but once they ironed that out it was actually a lot less burdensome than TQA. It wasn't perfect but it was less demanding. The problem with Subject Review was that it still led to a score, so it was going to eventually suffer from all the same problems."

Given that there was an acceptance of the principle of accountability, recognition of the value of external assessment, and a positive view of the emerging Scottish Enhancement Led Institutional Review methodology, the following interviewee comment provides an insightful view of the early TQA period and the distance that existed between the sector and the SHEFC at that time. The comment accordingly underlines the different environment that some consider exists in Scotland today at the sector level:

“They didn’t trust us. They thought that the quality was rubbish. I don’t think the quality was ever rubbish. We were inarticulate and didn’t have a language for describing what we were doing and we had to teach ourselves how to do all of that...So we became more articulate but it was stupidly complicated. Imagine a small department having to describe itself on eleven dimensions. It did require a lot of work. We did moan but we over moaned because the bulk of the moaning was political.”

7.4.2 The RAE, Research-Teaching Focus, and Promotion

As well the negative perspectives of external subject level review, it is argued that a further counter pressure on the continued enhancement of learning and teaching is the sector-wide focus on research. TQA and Subject Review introduced a degree of balance to this pressure but this could diminish if the academic community failed to accept the external process.

One interviewee underlined that although external assessment had helped retain the focus on learning and teaching, it was a difficult task to balance the attention paid to the review of research:

“It has certainly helped. It has not hindered. Institutions do take it very seriously...It in itself hasn’t done enough and this is a difficult one because, especially in cash-strapped times, institutions have to look to their main income sources. If a lot of money does flow from the RAE then effort has to go in there.”

Another interviewed was of the opinion that the otherwise unchecked focus could have been detrimental to teaching given that the funding mechanisms encouraged research focus:

“Certainly in the old universities I think that the RAE would have consumed even more of the time and I think it would have been damaging to the teaching. It’s not an easy conundrum to solve...there will continue to be pressure upon people because if you want to get extra money, once you have recruited the right number of students, if I do my research a bit better I can suddenly land a bonanza, there can be lots of cash...I think the RAE has gone too far because I think it has distorted people’s priorities...So much money now depends on it and therefore people have to focus so hard.”

Interviewees consistently highlighted the importance of gaining an appropriate balance in focus between research and teaching. For different interviewees this entailed taking a research perspective on teaching or the continuing development of a more prominent research presence while retaining an appropriate focus on learning and teaching. The importance of post-1992 universities developing research agendas is underlined by the following comment:

“I actually think that a teaching only higher education institution is a non sequitur. There has to be research...it has got to be active scholarship and active engagement with the understanding of the discipline.”

Although the importance of learning and teaching was highlighted, it was evident that there was an increasing focus, across the sector and its various levels, on research, as highlighted by the following comment:

“The fact that there is external scrutiny will mean that teaching has to be attended to but an individual, young, lecturer thinking about how they

were going to succeed would still have to conclude, certainly in an older university, that they should do their teaching, and do it well, but research is where they should put the emphasis. I think that will continue to be true."

A number of points were made regarding the research-teaching balance. For example, one interviewee underlined that a strong focus on research did not necessarily mean that teaching was neglected but acknowledged that there were complicated issues:

"There is a tension between improving your research rating and ensuring that those who are good teachers are not undervalued. It can be a worry, if you bring in the research whiz-kids you have to give them time and that means that other folk have to carry what they would see as other people's teaching...There is another stereotype about people not paying attention to students because they are so busy on their research but [TQA] didn't find evidence of that. There were departments that were active in research but they were also very keen on doing a good job for their students. There is no reason why the two can't be combined but it certainly does cause some tensions..."

Despite reforms to promotion criteria and efforts to embed this in the promotion process, it was recognised that success had been variable. One interviewee indicated that there was a distinction between the definition and use of teaching-related promotion criteria:

"If you look at criteria for promotion to Senior Lecturer and Professorship in some cases, not in all, they will make mention of expertise in teaching, but it is quite hard to find evidence of where that has actually been used."

For another interviewee, unlike research, a key obstacle was the difficulty in providing evidence of a strong teaching contribution, although some institutions were endeavouring to make inroads into this:

“Your paper highlights the whole business of promotions...One was searching for straws because there was no evidence to go on for teaching. Some universities, particularly new ones, have tackled that by finding ways in which people can present evidence of their portfolio that explains why I think I am a good teacher, that can actually be assessed and something can be done about ranking it. That is the critical problem in giving it real status.”

7.4.3 Trust, Accountability and Ownership

There was recognition that the external accountability of learning and teaching would continue. The challenge for the wider sector, i.e. including SHEFC and QAA, was to introduce a method that would provide enhancement and assurance with minimal burden. There was acknowledgement that universities should accept external accountability, given the significant public funds received. A system owned by the academic community but providing sufficient accountability would be beneficial because *“ a better system and one that is more likely to lead to enhancement is one that is driven by peers... ”*

There was a consistent view that a revised approach was necessary if the process of external review was to continue to have a positive impact rather than become solely an accountability mechanism. Although, as highlighted by one interviewee, the operation of the mechanism and the accompanying requirement for self-assessment was beneficial almost regardless of the detail of the process, it was agreed that a system that balanced trust and accountability while fostering ownership was sought.

External accountability not only meant that institutions and departments reviewed and enhanced their processes, it also ensured that the issue of the quality of learning and teaching provision was firmly on the policy agenda within universities.

However, there was a realisation that there was a fine line between having a process that fosters a positive focus on enhancement and one that results in a compliance culture. One interviewee considered the current situation to be as follows:

“Nationally, I don’t remember quality, as a term, having been discussed prior to 1992. I’m not saying that people weren’t concerned about good teaching and so on. It is certainly now a dimension that has to be addressed and it is a dimension that people think there is an issue about...I think it has raised the game amongst institutional systems...there is an assurance issue...On the one hand I’m pessimistic because it can boil down to bits of paper, compliance processes, and so on. On the other hand there is something real that is underlying that I think is part of the system in a way which was never the case before...”

A key point was that ownership of the proposed methodology by academics at the subject level was essential. One interviewee considered that:

“The whole process of quality assurance can only have any effect if it is viewed as something where we are all working collectively together...So anything that smacks of inspection or externals that are standing apart taking an independent view of things in that sense of the word, I think is doomed to failure. What does work and what does make a real difference, and I think why it has been more successful in Scotland, is when the sector itself has taken ownership of this.”

Another interviewee considered that a degree of faith should also be exercised by those responsible for the management of quality assurance, considering that they could resist encouraging ownership for fear that departments would be lax, whereas the need was to evolve departmental responsibility for quality assurance:

“Within the Scottish sector there are good people in quality assurance in very different institutions. The danger is that some people go native and

aren't terribly keen to give up the old stuff. One of the troubles with quality assurance is that it keeps changing and you find that the people in it like it as it is. There has been some resistance from the Teaching Quality Forum to the new changes on the grounds that you can't trust some of the departments. You've got to trust them."

To bring trust and accountability, the new approach required had to be "*viewed as something where we are all working collectively together*", a situation that would be aided when "*the sector itself has taken ownership*" of the methodology, its development and operation.

7.4.4 Opportunities and Challenges for the New Approach

At the time that the Sector Interviews were undertaken, the participants had a clear outline of what the new external accountability approach would entail.

There was a view that the proposed methodology, later titled Enhancement Led Institutional Review, in moving from the external review of cognate areas to the development of specific enhancement themes and the use of an increased student voice, represented a forward step in policy discussions compared to the early TQA policy conflicts of "*burden versus accountability*". Whilst the change in focus from assurance to enhancement viewed "*teaching as facilitating learning*" with "*the student at the centre of the process*", there was recognition that the proposed methodology did not guarantee that all academic staff would welcome the approach but might generally "*change the way people conceptualise what they are doing*".

Although "*an external event now and then is useful as a reality check*" it was considered that a more productive approach could be to move to an enhancement approach, creating a "*better agenda*", with the aim of building on the existing strong performance of the Scottish sector. Although the new methodology held the option of Subject Review in reserve, it was considered that the challenge was for the enhancement agenda to "*find issues and themes that will encourage people to think about things and maybe move in certain directions...rather than ticking boxes and*

jumping through hoops". It was highlighted that processes would have to continually evolve because *"people are going to learn to play the game, so you have to refresh the game otherwise people get into a routine of knowing which lever to pull to get the outcome."*

Regarding involving academic staff in the wider process, it was assumed that the focus on enhancement would link an institution and its departments. One interviewee saw the link as follows:

"...I'm assuming that enhancement is the glue that's going to hold this all together. [An institution will] have to have an Enhancement Policy and have to show what you're doing and all the rest of it."

The same interviewee considered that quality assessment methodology had matured beyond scores and leagues table and that the sector could now focus on formulating a system that could engage with staff and foster enhancement:

"It's not about league tables and scores, we've got past that. How can we use this system to genuinely improve what we're doing? I think that's a very important agenda because otherwise if you just have what I would call an assessment of procedures in place, you'll slip back to where we were before TQA...If you've got a system which is trying to improve by various enhancement activities, coming into people and offering them a carrot instead of a stick, I think it'll work because not many people like to feel that they are doing their job badly. If you've got a system which is genuinely offering opportunities to improve and which does say we will be asking your customers what they think, that brings the pressure on to make sure that the opportunity is taken."

Further, it was widely acknowledged that the increased use of students both in internal and external assessment was a positive step. One interviewee considered

that the role of Student Reviewers in the emerging ELIR process would aid assurance:

“Essentially the core question should be how do you know that your mechanisms for improving the experience of students are effective? So, no matter how good it is, the emphasis is on improving the student experience and the emphasis is not really on the paper trail but on how you know that whatever processes you’re using actually make a difference to what is happening with the students. I think having a student auditor will be helpful. I think it is a very interesting idea and I’m very pleased that folk have stuck to their guns over that. It will be quite challenging and quite difficult I’m sure, just in practical terms, but I think it will be very worthwhile. That should help to maintain the focus.”

Regarding on-going internal assurance systems, another interviewee considered that the increased role of the students would ensure that a department remained focused on learning and teaching issues: *“Having students involved in the governance of quality assurance will make it very hard for departments to hide.”*

There was an acknowledgement that the proposed system was one where *“institutions are seen as the guarantors of quality”*. Given that there would be *“considerable pressure on institutional central systems to be able to demonstrate that if something was failing they would catch it”*, a satisfactory Institutional Review would give SHEFC confidence in the institutional assurance of quality. As indicated above, it was anticipated that the focus should be on improving the student experience rather than producing a quality assurance paper trail.

There was recognition of *“genuine fears”* that departments would view satisfaction of the proposed methodology as being purely involving Enhancement Led Institutional Review and not incorporating an obligation to have appropriate internal measures, and also that satisfaction of ELIR was essentially a central task.

Accordingly, increased central university overview of departmental practices would drive a wedge between the centre and departments. One interviewee saw the context to this as follows:

“People do pick up headlines that indicate the end of Subject Review and that is the last that they think about it until someone in the university comes along and starts talking about reviewing their department. Then they think where is this coming from?”

Further, another interviewee recognised the danger that the centre could be perceived as an in-house QAA, given the pressure on institutions to ensure that internally consistent measures were in place. The following comment indicates the context behind this:

“Don’t forget that if you go back to the debate last year on lightness of touch, the QAA understanding of this was that they would do less and we would do more. That is their clear understanding.”

However, it was consistently underlined that *“departments would be very misguided”* if they considered that the new approach did not involve them: *“turning their backs and leaving it up to the centre, that won’t work”*. Given that this was at least initially a danger, there was clearly a role for institutional leadership and a need to *“bring departments into the fold, so that quality assurance is not done to them but done by them and with them.”*

One interviewee highlighted that the scale of the task of ensuring that departments took appropriate responsibility would vary between institutions, and there lay the challenge for the institutional leadership:

“There is a danger. I think that’s where you will find [a difference], not just between old and new universities but also between universities with different cultures about the level at which departments think they can do

their own thing. That is down to institutional leadership to make sure that doesn't happen."

It was evident that the enhanced role that TQA had created for those with institutional responsibility for the co-ordination of quality assurance would continue given that *"this most recent change is going to put much more of a high profile on the roles that those who co-ordinate quality assurance within universities play, there is no doubt about that."*

One interviewee highlighted that the obligation upon institutions to have robust internal procedures in place would ensure that appropriate responsibility was taken:

"I don't think there is a danger that departments will be allowed to forget about it and that it has gone away. Indeed the reverse is the case because these processes will always be there and won't just occur once in a five-year cycle."

Indeed, the core assurance aim remained the same but would now operate in a manner that granted greater institutional autonomy: *"It is not removing externality because externality will have to be included in it. The only difference is that you will choose your externality..."*

7.5 Summary

This chapter has shown that the data gathered from the Sector Interviews has, where relevant, corroborated the evidence obtained from the Institutional Interviews and Head of Department Interviews. Further, the Sector Interviews have supplemented the data to provide a greater level of understanding of the impact of the SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review processes, and the opportunities and challenges for the emerging third phase of external assessment.

The results of the Sector Interviews indicate that the operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in

Scottish universities acted as a catalyst in the enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, on a long-term basis. Further, this influence has impacted across a sector consisting of culturally distinct institutions.

However, it is also clearly evident that these benefits are strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of external accountability processes. Further, if the institutional and departmental focus for assuring and improving learning and teaching is to continue to be positively influenced, on a long-term basis, by external accountability processes, an appropriate balance must be constructed that instils ownership with subject level academics while ensuring a level of institutional overview sufficient to satisfy external accountability.

The following chapter summarises the research results and discusses them in the light of previous empirical work, highlighting emerging themes. Further, conclusions and implication are drawn, acknowledging the importance of the context in which the research is set.

Chapter Eight

Summary of Research Results, Conclusions, and Implications

8.1 Introduction

The preceding three chapters illustrate that the following propositions, presented earlier, are supported by the research results drawn from the Institutional Interviews, Head of Department Interviews and Sector Interviews:

1. The implementation and operation of external accountability in the form of SHEFC TQA, and latterly QAA Subject Review, in Scottish universities has had a positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.
2. The positive catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis, has occurred across the Scottish university sector, even though institutions are culturally distinct.
3. The benefits to be gained from SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of the processes. Such negative perspectives and the substantial focus on research performance could erode the benefits gained. For the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching to continue to be positively influenced by external processes on a long-term basis, future approaches must instil ownership of quality assurance with subject level academics while retaining a level of institutional assessment sufficient to satisfy the existing external accountability obligation.

In order to assess the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis, it is important to establish how the research results relate to the work of others and, taking into

account the context in which the research is set, identify the implications for theory and practice. This process is set out in two stages.

The first stage will clarify where the research results supplement, support or challenge existing knowledge of the impact of external assessment of learning and teaching in universities. In line with the research, the focus will remain on Scotland but will draw upon appropriate experiences elsewhere.

The second stage will consider the research results in the light of the context in which the study was set and present implications for practice and theory. Although the context of the discussion is one that focuses on Scottish higher education, broader implications for higher education management, public policy and management theory are identified.

Finally, possible limitations of the study, such as the chosen levels of analysis, and opportunities for further research, such as an assessment of the impact on the wider academic community of the emerging ELIR approach, will be presented.

8.2 Summary of Research Results

To aid the discussion of the contribution made by this thesis, a summary analysis of the research results is presented. For each proposition, a number of supporting themes have emerged. These are presented below and are expanded upon in the following sub-sections.

Proposition One: Enhancement/Revitalisation of the Institutional and Departmental Focus on the Quality of Learning and Teaching Provision on a Long-Term Basis

1. The importance of performing well in external quality assessments was a key catalytic factor in the enhancement of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

2. A resulting focus on performance in external quality assessments led to an increased focus on internal quality assurance, and with that learning and teaching.
3. Although the primary aim was performance, focus on, preparation for, and experience of external assessment led to a lasting enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.

Proposition Two: Influence Across a Sector of Culturally Distinct Universities

4. Perceptions of institutional cultures indicated that the sector was made up of culturally distinct universities. The variance in the institutional research/teaching focus and the approach to the balance between institutional overview and departmental responsibility regarding the quality assurance of learning and teaching supported this.
5. The occurrence of a level of convergence across the sector regarding approaches to the quality assurance of learning and teaching is a further indication that the influence of external assessment has been sector-wide.

Proposition Three: Impediment to Further Development and the Need for Ownership

6. Although it has had a positive influence the acceptance of external assessment remains fragile.
7. Further, negative aspects of external assessment may impede such processes from further aiding the enhancement of the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.
8. This is compounded by the continued focus on research and the resulting financial and status rewards that strong performance can bring to institutions, departments and individuals.

9. For the continued development of the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision an appropriate system, that instils ownership of quality assurance and enhancement with subject level academics, is needed.

8.2.1 Enhancement/Revitalisation of Focus on a Long-Term Basis

It is evident from the research results that external quality assessment, in the form of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review, acted as catalyst in the enhancement/revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision. The introduction and operation of external assessment created a situation whereby the desire to maintain or enhance institutional and departmental reputations, combined with varying forms of competition and the focus of professional staff, fostered a greater focus on quality assurance. This focus, regardless of views of the relevance of the review methods, led to a greater awareness and consideration, on a long-term basis, of the learning and teaching issues to which it related. This applied at sector, institutional, and departmental levels.

8.2.1.1 The Importance of Performance

A key factor in this catalytic process was the importance that institutions and departments attached to performance in SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review assessments. It could be argued that an underlying factor in creating a desire to perform well may have been the link between external assessment and funding. However, institutions and departments were considerably more focused on performing well in comparison to their peers than concerned about performing at such a poor level that their funding status was even threatened.

The desire to perform well appears to be an amalgam of a number of factors. The maintenance and possible enhancement of reputation was core but combined with this was the professionalism of academic staff. Such professionalism was two-fold. It embodied the desire to demonstrate that their learning and teaching provision was

of a high quality and it also signified a desire to underline that any doubts about the quality of provision were ill founded.

This focus on performance often manifested itself in a competitive manner that was evident in a number of relationships. There was inter-institutional, intra-institutional, and inter-discipline competition. Intra-institutional and inter-discipline aspects related specifically to departments. Although some concerns were raised regarding the conduct of individual review teams, to say that there was a strong element of competition is not necessarily meant to have negative connotations.

Negative perspectives did relate to the proliferation of the misguided media league tables that reduced educational provision to the lowest common denominator, producing a sound-bite summary of quality. However, regardless of their relevance and resulting academic opinion, such league tables grew in importance throughout the 1990s and added greater significance to the desire to perform well in external assessments.

Given the nature of league tables, they focused on the overall assessment performance of universities and thus institutions took them particularly seriously. However, departments were not entirely freed from such appraisal, as teaching assessment grades were also published within the detail of such analysis. Although the professional approach of staff was largely evident from the beginning of the 1992-2002 quality assessment continuum that this research focuses on, the institutional pressure to perform well and the often increased role of the centre of the university regarding external assessment preparations only grew once the importance that performance had for reputations became apparent.

It was evident that at the outset of the 1992-2002 period, across the sector institutions and departments had faith in the quality of their provision and, regardless of misgivings about the relevance of the assessment methods, were confident, at least initially, that external reviews would find this to be the case. For post-1992 universities this confidence could often be traced to their detailed and lengthy

experience of CNAAs validations. The confidence of the pre-1992 universities was linked to their history of respected provision. The first year of SHEFC TQA brought expected strong results for some but for others there were surprising and worrying gradings. With the link between performance and reputation becoming more clearly established, focus on external review preparations increased.

8.2.1.2 A Greater Focus on Quality Assurance and Learning and Teaching

Of telling significance, in terms of the enhanced institutional focus that developed across the sector, was the management of preparations for external assessments. Adopting an approach that entailed greater central co-ordination or control is not the acid test for indicating increased institutional focus. What is relevant is the extent to which institutions made a conscious decision to operate a particular approach, be it corporate or devolved. Some universities more than others took a conscious decision and of these, several chose to operate a less formal mechanism. In those universities that recognised at an early stage the institutional importance of performing appropriately in quality assessments, it was clearly evident that individuals in key positions had the foresight to raise institutional awareness and the drive to ensure that a conscious decision was taken regarding how external quality assessment should be addressed.

In a variety of institutions the importance of performance was recognised after worrying TQA reports. Such reports acted as a catalyst for a change in approach regarding external assessment, with institutions requiring and aiding appropriate departmental preparation. For example, a poor result could lead to increased central support to departments.

Whilst such remedial action was initially and primarily to ensure that assessment performance was improved or that poor results were avoided, such developments, where necessary, laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive approach to institutional policy formulation, implementation and monitoring. Indeed, this increased focus on internal policy occurred across the sector as institutions became aware of the impact of TQA.

Across the sector, even in institutions more focused on TQA from the outset than others and those that generally operated a more corporate than devolved approach to institutional and department management, there was often a lack of preparatory support for departments. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1992-2002 period most institutions were less focused than, in hindsight, they would have preferred. Accordingly, as external quality assessment became embedded, approaches to its satisfaction evolved in light of experience, including in institutions with strong results. However, without the alarm bells of poor results, some institutions failed to provide the additional support to departments that may have produced even stronger grades.

Both institutional and departmental leadership were identified as being core to the focus on external assessment and key factors in driving forward both remedial and developmental action. Again, this push for focus was not necessarily consistent across the sector, with some universities being slower than others to put systems in place to ensure that the best possible results were achieved.

In several universities the support of senior officers became more evident when remedial or developmental action was required. As the importance of performance became clear, institutions would tackle departments that lacked assessment focus, utilising institutional/faculty senior officers, appropriately empowered committees or key administrators, as necessary. However, such central coercion was rarely needed and when it was, the lack of departmental focus related more to resistance to external accountability or the processes used than learning and teaching and its quality assurance. Although university level leadership was initially evident in terms of raising institutional and departmental awareness of the need to perform well in external assessment, latterly it came more to the fore in terms of garnering support for the revision of university quality assurance procedures.

However, approaches to the management of external assessments varied across the sector, as indeed did general approaches to university management. In many institutions preparations were managed at the departmental level, with, at least

initially, little central guidance. Frequently the key role lay with the Head of Department, who often identified with departmental pride in the face of both external review and the various forms of competition noted earlier. However, in others there was a stronger central influence on departmental preparations and in a small number of universities internal reviews became closely linked to preparation for external assessment.

Regardless of the institutional approach adopted, leadership at departmental level was evident across the sector, with Heads of Departments or departmental Directors of Teaching (generic title) often compensating for any initial shortfall in central university support or guidance. For example, departmental staff often decided to become peer reviewers despite a lack of institutional encouragement. Further, preparatory informal networks, involving those about to be assessed and those with experience of the process, either through assessment or as peer reviewers, developed at departmental/faculty level.

Across the sector, the approaches adopted enabled institutions and departments to satisfy external assessment in a manner consistent with the university's culture and structure. Evolving formal and informal mechanisms were often created to aid assessment preparation and to facilitate institutional understanding of the process, through scrutiny of review outcomes and peer reviewer feedback or the use of earlier self-assessment documentation as exemplars.

Some universities established quality units. These had varying levels of involvement but consistently the approach was guidance rather than instruction. Those with Quality Units felt that their operation had aided the attainment of strong results and in doing so had gained credibility for the Unit. Generally those without Quality Units considered that the establishment of a Unit might inhibit the ownership of quality assurance within faculties and departments or that guidance and support was best provided in their own institution-specific way.

Institutional and departmental preparation was often aided by staff participation as peer reviewers. Although for some participation was an endorsement of peer review over an inspectorate, the core aim was to gain an insight into the process, the preparation required and items that should be addressed prior to reviews. It was essential to 'learn the rules' and participation provided such an opportunity. Although participation may initially have been to insure against under-performance, it also brought an increased departmental focus on quality assurance issues and the learning and teaching issues to which it related. Institutions that achieved disappointing results took a more proactive view to encouraging nominations, whilst those with a record of nominating reviewers continued to pursue this strategy.

The increased institutional focus also applied to relations with the wider university sector. Indeed, although the majority of institutions, to varying extents were actively involved in the discussions leading up to TQA, the sector as a whole in 2002 had an almost uniformly intense focus on external developments that was considerably less evident in the early 1990s. Again, the rapid increase in focus was initially a rearguard action but the resulting sector-wide focus further enhanced the institutional focus of individual universities. This perhaps offset the initial lack of internal discussion evident in some institutions when the TQA process was emerging. As indicated earlier, such a lack of focus was likely borne from confidence in the quality of provision and a failure to realise the potential impact of TQA.

Not only did individual institutions decide that greater attention should be paid, the sector as a whole developed a collective approach. From the inception of TQA the intensity of institutional participation in discussions continued to grow as the sector endeavoured to have a stronger hand in the development of the public policy that impinged upon them and, of course, institutions sought to be fully aware of the details of evolving processes.

Formal and informal networks were rapidly established or used to a greater extent and this focus continued as the period moved from 1992 to 2002. The valuable role of bodies such as the grouping of Research Intensive Universities and particularly the

Teaching Quality Forum was evident. The collective approach was an indication of the concern regarding the impact of external assessment and underlined the view that only a concerted and focused input from institutions would influence public policy developments. Indeed, there was some doubt as to how 'genuine' consultations with the sector regarding the development of both TQA and Subject Review actually were.

In comparison to the development of TQA, the QAA period saw a consistently higher level of importance given to participation in consultations. There was a feeling that a failure to comment left no room for complaint if an inadequate system was introduced. The impact of TQA had raised the institutional and sector focus on learning and teaching issues and intensified the willingness and necessity to participate in QAA discussions. Importantly, sector discussion of quality assurance processes also ensured that the learning and teaching issues to which they related remained on the agenda, achieving a greater status and receiving more attention.

8.2.1.3 Enhancement/Revitalisation on a Long-Term Basis

The importance of performance in external assessments, preparation for them, and subsequent learning from them, led to a greater enhancement or revitalization of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.

The focus on performing well in external assessments meant that considerable attention was paid to preparatory aspects. In particular, departments reflected upon their aims and practices. Again, although in some cases these measures were initially to demonstrate their approach to quality assurance, and ensure a good external assessment performance, reflection and experience of assessment led to longer term changes.

Although there was a strong retrospective element to external review, it was generally considered that, to varying degrees, self-evaluation and reflection aided the process of change and that external review could perhaps bring a different

perspective than was available from existing internal processes. There was also evidence that the preparation for external assessments brought the department being reviewed closer together and, importantly, this was in a learning and teaching context.

A core benefit of the increased focus on learning and teaching was that there was a greater propensity for staff to actively review the aims of courses and the methods employed to achieve them. Moreover, practices and strategies were revised and where necessary, clarified, formalised and documented. Institutions and departments tuned existing practices. Implicit, often ad hoc, mechanisms became explicit, routine, and were given a higher priority. In many instances a more focused approach to course and student-orientated documentation evolved, as did a more proactive approach to acting upon student opinion. Again, although performance in external assessment was the initial aim, this focus was largely retained.

Further, there was filtering back from peer reviewers of reassurance that internal provision was strong or that it could benefit from the good practice of others. Although reviewers generally reported back to their own departments, in several institutions informal discussions with peer review participants were held to aid other subject areas in their preparations.

In highlighting the enhancement or revitalisation of the focus on learning and teaching issues at institutional and departmental levels, it is not suggested that an existing, genuine focus on assurance and improvement did not exist. Rather, this was revitalised, strengthened, and became more evident. It was clearly evident that the dual process of purposeful reflection as part of the preparation and the reality of external review ensured that addressing learning and teaching issues gained a greater priority.

Further, in highlighting the scope of developments, it is not intended to imply that institutions and departments did not have sufficient practices; indeed some of these would exemplify best practice. Rather, the enhanced focus meant that quality

assurance practices and the learning and teaching activities to which they related were, on the whole, improved.

As well as a productive increased institutional and departmental focus on learning and teaching, the balance between institutional overview and departmental ownership of the quality assurance and enhancement of learning and teaching was also reviewed and revised. Whilst institutions established mechanisms to review departmental draft review documentation with a view to ensuring appropriate performance in assessments, this increased interaction between the university and its departments often led to a revision of the existing balance of responsibility. Obviously the notion of striking such a balance was not new to institutions but, again, action taken regarding external assessment placed this issue on the agenda and, latterly, it was considered in the context of the assurance and enhancement of the quality of provision rather than solely external assessment.

Although the basic committee structure of institutions generally remained the same, incorporating the additional TQA/QAA business as appropriate, institutional and departmental processes for the management of quality assurance evolved. It is evident that prior to SHEFC TQA pre-1992 and post-1992 universities had contrasting levels of formality in their quality assurance processes. In the pre-1992 universities, as TQA became embedded and institutional awareness of its importance grew, quality assurance mechanisms and processes evolved, gaining greater formality and structure. For example, changes that were highlighted included the strengthening of the remit of central and faculty committees and also the revision of internal review, monitoring and reporting policies.

Generally, prior to TQA the pre-1992 universities had internal quality assurance systems that were devolved, informal and operated largely on the basis of trust. In revising practices, the aim was that an increased overview of departmental and faculty practices would not reduce local academic responsibility. Again, external assessment related developments evolved to a consideration of wider, longer term

issues of assurance and enhancement. Whilst natural evolution undoubtedly played a part in such developments, external assessment was often a catalyst or impetus.

CNAA experience meant that post-1992 universities were accustomed to, and largely accepting of, additional (external/professional and statutory body) assessment. Generally, such experience fostered a centralised approach to external assessment, which may have taken some responsibility away from the subject level academic staff. On the whole, post-1992 universities retained their CNAA-based mechanisms but, over varying periods of time, sought to streamline their processes in light of the evolution of the institution and shifting requirements of external assessment. This streamlining was carried out with the intention of removing unnecessary burdens whilst encouraging enhanced review and reflection. For example, in some institutions there was a greater recognition that the satisfaction of external assessment was the responsibility of departments as well as of the centre of the institution.

Across the sector, universities encouraged, to varying degrees, a developmental approach, focusing on internal definition and satisfaction of quality and standards rather than compliance with an external system. Establishing departmental ownership of quality assurance and enhancement was a key aim. In several institutions, particularly pre-1992 universities, it was felt that departmental ownership of process would be achieved if policy was developed through a centrally-guided iterative approach, which although time consuming allowed processes to be based upon existing departmental approaches. In other institutions, the centre took a stronger lead in the definition of policy.

Regardless of the manner in which policy was defined, institutions generally allowed a degree of departmental freedom in how centrally agreed policy was applied. Although institution-wide policy was essential, departments had the core responsibility of ensuring standards and quality. A key element in the institutional overview element was striking an appropriate balance between policing the practices of departments and supporting them in discharging their responsibilities. In

endeavouring to foster critical self-reflection and seeking avoid to a compliance culture, most post-1992 university interviewees indicated a move from a centralist steer to encouraging departmental responsibility and, accordingly, ownership of quality assurance issues.

The balance between departmental ownership and institutional overview varied between institutions. The harmonisation of internal and external processes, initially aimed at aiding preparation but latterly intent on minimising review burden, also differed amongst institutions. It was considered that substantial progress in achieving an institution-department balance had been achieved. Considerable progress had also been made in managing the internal-external review balance. It was considered that evolution on both fronts would continue.

Although internal processes could aid external assessment performance, and harmonisation could perhaps reduce the overall burden on departments, it was underlined that the ultimate aim was of establishing a rigorous system that would bring internal benefit. Again, although natural evolution undoubtedly played a part, in some institutions external assessment acted as a catalyst by raising awareness of underlying quality assurance, and learning and teaching, issues and placing them firmly on institutional and departmental agendas. In others, external assessment results had a direct impact.

As highlighted, the focus on quality assurance and its related learning and teaching issues continued. It was recognised that although progress had been made on the implementation and monitoring of processes, continued evolution was necessary. There were strong indications that institutions across the sector were developing a more strategic approach to enhancement, with evolving efforts to disseminate throughout the university the good practice found in departments and a clearer focus on the enhancement in the evolution of processes such as internal reviews. Again, it is the enhancement and continuing focus that is underlined, it is not suggested that previous quality assurance arrangements did not look at ways to improve the quality of provision.

It was apparent that external assessment pressure to articulate and demonstrate practices aided the evolution of institutionally coherent approaches to quality assurance. Although in developing policies and practices universities acted in line with their institutional mission and culture, developing matters from an internal perspective, it was apparent that, to varying degrees, external assessment had provided the impetus for such evolution and aided some institutions in making necessary changes whilst maintaining good relations with departments.

Although many changes were viewed as being part of the natural evolution of institutions, it was recognised that there remained a close association with external assessment policy developments. Importantly, it was evident that external assessment had impacted upon the culture and had created a greater focus on progressing the institutional and departmental development of processes. Whilst universities would have continued to evolve their processes and practices, external review had acted as a catalyst and institutions and departments had sustained this renewed focus on quality assurance and its related learning and teaching issues.

Essentially, a long-term enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision on basis was evident. The importance of performing well raised the sector, institutional, and departmental focus and this led to reflection upon and revision of practices. Indeed, learning and teaching issues remained on sector, institutional and departmental agendas with institutions largely successful in sustaining this enhanced focus.

It is underlined that a culture of assurance and improvement was not created, rather external assessment acted as a catalyst in the enhancement or revitalisation of an underlying focus. Without an existing and genuine focus to build upon, quality assessment processes would likely have elicited a compliant but hollow response. Although the benefits may not have filtered to every member of staff, it was generally accepted that external review had a beneficial effect on institutions and

departments. It was considered that those that had been involved in the process recognised its value.

It is argued that the influence of external assessment aided the development of a culture of continuing improvement. The influence of external review and the resulting need for the articulation and transparency of practices had created an environment where the culture of quality assurance and enhancement was more evident and effective. It was strongly evident that the greatest contributing factor to the enhancement of the institutional and departmental focus on a long-term basis was that, owing to external assessment, teaching and quality assurance issues were recognised across the sector and within institutions and departments as being important. It is not argued that this focus is new. Indeed, participation of staff as peer reviewers underlined that teaching, not just research, was important. However, it is argued that this focus has, over time, been enhanced or revitalised.

The increased focus that external assessment led to gave teaching and learning activity a higher credibility within the sector. External assessment and the resulting increased focus on teaching provided increased recognition of the value of academic staff with a primary focus on teaching. It was clearly evident that it was the catalyst for enhanced preparation, reflection and revision. Although the initial impetus was to ensure appropriate external assessment performance, this, in turn, led to broader, long-term, policy and practice developments. Policies would have developed as part of the natural evolution of the institutions but external assessment had a catalytic influence on this. Further, it positively influenced a conscious move towards enhancement and critical self-evaluation. Although it acted as catalyst, an internal momentum developed, leading to further internally motivated enhancements.

It was clearly evident that the influence of external assessment was aided by the professional approach of academic staff and their positive reaction to the requirement to demonstrate the quality of their provision. It was able to build upon the underlying institutional and departmental acceptance of responsibility for the quality of provision.

8.2.2 The Influence Across the Scottish University Sector

8.2.2.1 A Sector of Culturally Distinct Universities

As detailed, the influence of external assessment occurred across the Scottish university sector. Further, taking into account Institutional Interviewee perceptions of their institution, it is evident that this influence occurred in a sector constituted of culturally distinct universities. Indeed, variance across the sector in terms of the research-teaching balance and the perceived institutionally appropriate balance between central overview and departmental ownership of the quality assurance of learning and teaching provision also indicates that institutions are individually distinct.

The significance of this is that external assessment was able to have a similar influence across an enlarged and diverse post-1992 Scottish university sector that brought together ancient institutions, 1960s civic/modern universities, and former centrally controlled polytechnics and colleges.

8.2.2.2 A Level of Sector Convergence on Quality Assurance Issues

An additional theme supporting the proposition that external assessment had a sector-wide impact is the widely held perception that the enlarged post-1992 Scottish university sector underwent a degree of convergence regarding views on the quality assurance of learning and teaching. This convergence relates to views on both the acceptance of the external accountability of learning and teaching and opinions regarding the way forward for the Scottish sector on this matter.

There was a strong view that pre-1992 universities were becoming more accepting, though perhaps reluctantly, of the reality of external accountability, while post-1992 universities were becoming more vocal and less passively compliant than previously. Regarding the way forward for external accountability, there was a consistent view across the Scottish sector that the approach should foster ownership rather than compliance; be based upon institutional audit rather than subject level assessment; and have a greater focus on enhancement than assurance. It is argued that the

experience of the implementation and operation of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review has led to this partial convergence across the sector.

It was apparent that external assessment, to some extent, led to an increased awareness of the purpose and aims of institutions on either side of the former Binary Line. Further there was some feeling that both sides of the former binary line had learned from each other, perhaps aided by both the sector-wide experience of a common process and by assurance and enhancement issues clearly remaining on sector and institutional agendas given the on-going discussions regarding external accountability policy and assessment process.

Partial convergence may have been aided by the belief that external accountability policy development would best be faced collectively, principally through the operation of the Teaching Quality Forum, which was widely recognised as being a strength of the Scottish system. The TQF succeeded in aiding individual institutions to speak with a concerted voice and became a key consultative group. In terms of the continuing convergence between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities on quality assurance, several interviewees identified TQF discussions as illustrating that sector views were beginning to coalesce.

Importantly the TQF brought staff together that were both senior members of universities and, vitally, had a core role in their own institutions regarding the assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching provision. In bringing key personnel together, the TQF also facilitated the non-competitive exchange of good practice, often continuing outside meetings. The Forum also aided awareness of the purpose and aims of institutions on either side of the former Binary Line. It is argued that the TQF aided, represented and helped maintain an increased sector-wide institutional focus on the assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching provision.

The TQF benefited from a small amount of member institutions and the relative ease of travel afforded by the geography of Scotland and, vitally, the open nature of

discussions, with the Head of the QAA Scottish Office participating in the spirit of the forum. Indeed, the existence of a QAA Scottish Office and the approachable nature of its management was widely recognised as a factor in maintaining an effective dialogue between the universities and those operating the external process.

Although there was a degree of convergence regarding the acceptance of external accountability, the sector had not converged. Further, some interviewees underlined that broader differences outside the quality assurance context remained between the pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. Indeed, this thesis only considered convergence in terms of matters related to quality assurance and assessment. Regarding the possibility that external assessment had fostered links between academic departments in different institutions, views varied and it is concluded that the impact depended on individual situations.

8.2.3 Continued Influence: Impediments and Requirements

8.2.3.1 The Fragile Acceptance of External Accountability

Although external assessment had a widespread and beneficial influence, it is clearly evident that there are a number of impediments to a continued impact. Of these, the fragile acceptance of external accountability and of the processes adopted is a pivotal issue.

Taking the sector as a whole, it was evident that a greater acceptance of the principle of external accountability existed at the end of the 1992-2002 period than at the beginning. Within this, a greater change was evident in the pre-1992 universities, perhaps given that CNAA experience had instilled an acceptance of externality in the post-1992 universities. Over the 1992-2002 period, experience of external assessment led to the abatement of the pre-1992 view that the sector should stand against such processes as a matter of principle. This greater acceptance may have been partly owed to an acknowledgement of how universities were funded and a realisation that higher education public policy on this matter was unlikely to significantly change.

However, this increased acceptance was to an extent reluctant and fragile. This was more evident in pre-1992 universities but was also found in post-1992 universities. Of relevance to this thesis and to the future development of external assessment is that there was considerably greater resistance to the processes used than to the principle of external accountability. The view existed and remained that there was the need for an appropriate, accepted, system that would ensure that the subject level and institutional autonomy were not compromised by external assessment.

It was evident that if an appropriate system was not achieved, institutions, in their relationships with their own academic communities, would find keeping academic staff on board increasingly difficult when trying to satisfy external requirements. Although there was a consistent feeling across institutions and departments that responsibility for the assurance and enhancement of learning and teaching rested primarily with departments, this to an extent underlines that difficulties could arise if departments perceived that external assessment processes bore little relevance to their learning and teaching activity yet institutions found themselves responsible for adhering to such external requirements.

8.2.3.2 Negative Aspects of External Assessment

Negative perceptions of aspects of the review processes used also represent an impediment to the continued influence of external assessment. The perception that detriments outweighed benefits was founded on concerns regarding the burden, relevance, and operational aspects of TQA and Subject Review.

A key burden was the amount of time expended by institutions and departments on satisfying external accountability. This was often seen as an opportunity cost to other activities including teaching. However, it was recognised that part of the burden was perhaps brought about by the desire to do as well as possible. The financial burden of satisfying external accountability, for example preparation of additional documentation and/or having staff devoted to this, was also highlighted. Indeed, interviewees from smaller institutions, though recognising that sector-wide scrutiny would mean that institutions should be treated equally, highlighted the

disproportionate cost of introducing formal internal mechanisms in response to external assessment and developments when informal practices could operate effectively on a small scale. Regarding relevance, there was concern that the continued operation of a process that was perceived to be retrospective and bureaucratic could foster a negative view of quality assurance rather than support a culture of enhancement.

Concerns were also raised regarding the operation of the processes and the scope for inconsistency. Issues included grade inflation over the period of the TQA process and, especially, that reviewers often came with agendas and expectations, thus failing to respect institutional diversity. This in turn could have a negative influence on staff morale given the feeling that the judgement was unfair and ill-founded. Linked to this were concerns regarding the use of weak evidence in judgements. Such concerns were compounded when weaknesses in the evidence were acknowledged and the report was altered but the grading remained. It was evident that disillusionment regarding the process could strongly counter the internal momentum created by preparation for external assessment.

A further concern was that honesty in self-assessment regarding weaknesses was punished. Institutions and departments learned from what they felt were harsh experiences and sought to conceal what could be perceived as a weakness. There was a perception that some reviewers worked from a premise that presumed guilt. Moreover, the competitive nature of external assessment could be detrimental to sector-wide subject area relationships, particularly in small cognate areas. Concern about the validity of judgements made by peer reviewers could also be detrimental to cognate-area peer relationships. Indeed, in some cases a motivating factor for participants was that undertaking the role of peer review could be a protective measure. Again, this was more likely to apply in smaller cognate areas.

8.2.3.3 Research Primacy and Promotion Actuality

Although external quality assessment processes have had a long-term impact in terms of raising the focus on learning and teaching, there remained evidence that there was

an increasing focus on research, including in institutions where it did not already have primacy. Given this focus on research activity, it could be argued that a continuing, but appropriate, external quality assessment method would be required to maintain the focus on learning and teaching and halt the influence of the benefits gained subsiding. Essentially, the extent of the focus on research can be detrimental to the attention given to learning and teaching and its assurance and enhancement.

Across the sector, the importance of research performance was apparent. Generally, the institutional balance in pre-1992 universities favoured research over teaching, whilst, generally, the primary focus in post-1992 universities was on learning and teaching. Post-1992 universities recognised that research was an integral part of being a university and although research was pursued from a more modest background or was focused in smaller areas than in the many of the pre-1992 universities, its increasing importance was evident.

Of course, all institutions sought to strike an appropriate balance in their focus on research and teaching that was appropriate to their mission and it was emphasised that regardless of the extent of the focus on research, teaching was considered to be both a core activity and of a high standard. Further, it was highlighted that a strong research performance did not necessarily detract from the excellence of teaching and it was evident that there was a strong desire that the focus on research, whether embedded or emerging, should not be to the detriment of learning and teaching.

Core to the research focus was RAE performance, which was highlighted across the sector as being a key issue for institutions. A key part of the catalytic activity of external assessment was that it raised the level of focus on quality assurance and associated learning and teaching issues. It was widely recognised that the importance placed by institutions and departments on TQA and Subject Review performance was such that these processes acted as an important counterweight to the RAE and its demands on academic staff.

The financial and educational importance of learning and teaching activities was not lost on institutions but the lure of RAE success meant that hard-pressed academic staff had to focus their energies on the most demanding areas. The advent of TQA meant that learning and teaching also demanded specific attention.

Despite this, research activity and performance remained firmly to the fore in many institutions. Indeed, several interviewees highlighted that performance in the RAE, be it good or poor, brought a more intense and sustained institutional reaction than similar performances in external reviews of teaching. The value of TQA performance in terms of university profile was recognised and there was a strong underlying appreciation of learning and teaching issues. Indeed, external assessment had underlined their importance. However, the credibility, status, and financial rewards that research brought remained or had become increasingly important to institutions.

The relationship between promotion and research performance was also apparent. Although promotion criteria included teaching and administration, promotion to senior positions (e.g. Senior Lecturer and particularly Professor) was heavily based upon research performance. The research focus of promotion applied across the sector but was more evident in pre-1992 universities. Further, the research focus of promotion was recognised by staff within institutions and underlined the primacy of research performance.

The focus on research, and in turn its link to promotion, could leave teaching focused staff feeling undervalued. Indeed, there was recognition that a substantial number of staff had a primary focus on teaching and that institutions must strive to recognise both this role and the value of these employees. Although it was apparent that an increased focus on recognising teaching contributions was emerging across the sector, this only had a limited impact on senior promotions.

The link between the need for greater recognition of teaching staff and the difficulty in assessing the quality of teaching provision was widely acknowledged. Whilst

there was a recognised mechanism for assessing research performance, there was no clear method for evaluating the contribution of teaching staff. Even in institutions where teaching-related promotion appeared to be stronger, there often was no clear method for the evaluation of teaching. However, a growing number of institutions across the sector were continuing in their endeavours to recognise the value of teaching staff through a coherent and transparent mechanism.

8.2.3.4 The Need for Subject Level Assurance and Enhancement Ownership

It was widely evident that despite its beneficial influence there was a need for a revised approach to the external review of learning and teaching and that the continued operation of subject level review would have yielded diminishing returns and could have fostered a compliance culture. The extent of the external accountability, regarding both research and teaching, that universities faced was generally considered to be excessive. The diminished enthusiasm among staff to participate as peer reviewers during the QAA Subject Review period is seen as a symptom of assessment fatigue amongst staff.

Although there were varying views on the level of acceptance, it was apparent that the academic community had, on the whole, recognised that external accountability would remain part of higher education public policy. Further it was recognised that continued external assessment would ensure that institutions and departments did not lose their focus on the assurance and improvement of the quality of learning and teaching in the face of research primacy.

It was emphasised that SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review had evidenced that learning and teaching provision was consistently of a high standard and that a less intrusive, more trusting approach was now appropriate. There was a need to finally develop and agree upon a lasting system as continuing uncertainty was detrimental to the maintenance of an institutional/departmental focus on such external requirements. Failure to move to an accepted, flexible, system could bring undesirable rigidity and conformity that may restrict evolution and become an encumbrance.

The future methodology had to be accepted and owned by academics in order to be truly beneficial. If the system was not considered to be relevant it would meet resistance both at sector level and within institutions. This could pose particular problems for relationships between universities and their departments. Sector-wide institutional recognition, linked to an existing internal focus, had empowered those with central responsibility for quality assurance to progress the development of internal processes. Institutions sought to ensure that the satisfaction of external assessment was appropriately aligned with the culture and management of their university and that the internal quality assurance and enhancement agenda would also satisfy outside scrutiny. However, institutional efforts to co-ordinate the satisfaction of external assessment, despite best intentions, could create or widen divides between the centre of the university and academic staff who did not consider the approach to be relevant. The institutional management could be viewed as an agent of the QAA rather than as the protector of academic freedom and an advocate of the professionalism of its staff.

Although the institutional and departmental focus was enhanced on a long-term basis despite concerns about the processes, a strong factor in this was that SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review were addressed by staff in a professional manner. As the 1992-2002 period has passed, relationships between the university sector and SHEFC and the QAA appear to have grown to encourage a more open and genuine dialogue. However, academic goodwill is likely to continually weaken unless a process is accepted as being one that is focused on enhancing learning and teaching provision rather than perceived as a mechanism founded on mistrust with the prime role of exacting accountability. An unaccepted system of external assessment would be more likely to create a compliance culture rather than foster enhancement. Further a compliance-orientated, standardised approach could discourage institutions from tackling broader developmental issues themselves.

To aid ownership, it was underlined that subject level review should be solely internal but that the institutional mechanisms used should be assessed in order to satisfy the accountability obligation. Institutional diversity in terms of structuring

and monitoring its assurance and enhancement mechanisms should be respected. It was hoped that this approach would foster subject level ownership by allowing institutional autonomy in refining internal processes to be in tune with the institutional culture whilst satisfying external accountability. An essential part of lightening the burden and of acknowledging institutional diversity in approach would be to utilise internal documentation for the satisfaction of external assessment. It was considered that this would provide a greater incentive to ensure that documentation was appropriate given that it would not be rewritten for external assessment purposes.

Although there was a desire for a less onerous, more relevant system, the value of subject level interaction and the sharing of experience were recognised. The redirection of the principal external focus from department to institution might mean that it would be difficult for the process to impact upon a large proportion of academics. Indeed, there was a danger that because the external review of the subject level had ended, the wider academic community might perceive that external accountability had gone as well.

With the aim of gaining the maximum benefit from the new methodology and with the desire to ensure that academic staff felt that the process was relevant and positive, an enhancement agenda was sought. With this focus the necessary level of review would hopefully avoid creating either a compliance culture or grudging acceptance. It was hoped that the academic community would respond to the positive nature of an enhancement agenda, even though external interventions could still be perceived as being about policing. Whilst a move to an enhancement agenda was welcomed, caution was expressed regarding a view that continuous year-on-year improvement would be made.

8.3 Relationship with Literature on External Quality Assessment

In establishing the research question and propositions, Chapter Three highlighted aspects of previous empirical work. In order to assess the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis and to enable implications to be drawn, it is important to consider

how the research results relate to such studies. Accordingly, in establishing how the current research supports, challenges or supplements previous work, aspects of these studies will again be highlighted. Given that the current research focuses on external quality assessment, the literature regarding culture and managerialism and the theoretical links to the public and private sectors, discussed in Chapter Three, has not been revisited in the current chapter. This is because its purpose was to provide contextual background, not the focus, for the current research. However, having presented the results of the current study and considered them against previous empirical work on quality assessment in universities, implications applicable to the university sector and also to the public and private sectors will be drawn in the light of the contextual background previously set out in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

As highlighted in Chapter Three, although much has been written about higher education public policy, analysis of the impacts, according to Kogan and Hanney (2000), has been largely inferential. Indeed, regarding quality assessment, Drennan (2000) highlights the lack of research undertaken. Although this thesis is able to draw upon the work of others, its focus is distinct. Whilst the SHEFC TQA related research of Drennan (2000), Sharp (1997) and Evaluation Associates Ltd (1998) employed a more mechanistic approach to determining the success of TQA and its constituent elements, the current study embraces wider and perhaps less traditionally tangible aspects in addressing the long-term catalytic effect of the external quality assessment of learning and teaching provision. For example, the influence of the very existence of an external process is just as much part of the focus as the influence of the detail of process. Indeed, the interaction of internal and external contextual factors is also important. Further, this study considers the entire period of subject level review, i.e. 1992-2002, and focuses solely on this form of assessment. However, like others (e.g. Stensaker 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2000a), this research recognises that measuring the impact of quality assessment is challenging, especially given that this was only one policy in a period of many changes and pressures.

Again as noted in Chapter Three, where relevant, research on related experiences outside Scotland is also considered. For example, aspects of Henkel's (e.g. Henkel,

2000) research into how reform policies and structural changes affected the identities of academic staff and Brennan's individual and collaborative research (e.g. Brennan 2000a) on assessment and accountability, will be discussed. However, as detailed in Chapter Two, Scottish Higher Education; the policy and process debates regarding assessment and accountability; SHEFC TQA; and university level operation of QAA Subject Review; though akin to experiences elsewhere, are distinct to Scotland and as such require that specific research be undertaken. Although elements of previous work overlaps with aspects of the current study, overwhelmingly the current study represents a distinct contribution in terms of its focus, propositions and resulting themes.

In order to clarify the link with existing work and to underline the distinctiveness of the current research, the following subsections will discuss the elements of the research results that support, challenge or supplement previous studies. This entails a discussion of the catalytic influence on the institutional and departmental focus on a long-term basis; the experience across a culturally distinct university sector; and the requirement for, and impediments to, further beneficial external influence. Given that Section 8.2 clearly sets out the research results, those aspects that do not overlap with previous studies are not repeated.

8.3.1 Enhancement/Revitalisation of Focus on a Long-Term Basis

As presented in section 8.2, the following three key themes emerged from research into the proposition that external assessment had a catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

1. The importance of performing well in external quality assessments was a key catalytic factor in the enhancement of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis.

2. A resulting focus on performance in external quality assessments led to an increased focus on internal quality assurance, and with that learning and teaching.
3. Although the primary aim was performance, focus on, preparation for, and experience of external assessment led to a lasting enhancement or revitalisation of the existing institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.

Although the link between reputation and the importance of performance in external assessments has previously been highlighted by research both in a UK context (e.g. Brennan and Shah, 2000a; Henkel, 2000) and specifically in relation to SHEFC TQA (e.g. Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998; Sharp et al, 1997), the current research additionally emphasises that the importance of performance laid the foundation for external assessment to have a beneficial influence on the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching on a long-term basis.

Further, although the competitive nature of TQA and the associated value attached to league tables has been noted elsewhere (e.g. in relation to HEFCE TQA by Taylor 2003; Bauer and Henkel, 1999) the research results emphasise that the focus on external assessment was also closely tied to the professionalism of academic staff. Such professionalism embodied the desire to demonstrate that their learning and teaching was of an existing high quality and to underline that any doubts about such provision were ill founded.

Although status and reputation could be tied in with such desires, the inclusion of professionalism in an equation that so often focuses on competition and league tables is vital, for a combination of internal and external factors have created an environment in which external assessment could have a beneficial catalytic influence. With professionalism as a core factor, it is evident that the enhanced or revitalised focus is not an artificial construct with a shelf life solely determined by the existence or demise of a performance indicator culture.

Other contributing factors were institutional pressure to perform well and the increased role of the centre of the university regarding external assessment preparations once the importance that performance had for reputations became apparent. This supports a similar scenario found by Henkel (2000) regarding HEFCE TQA.

However, it is argued that the importance of performance was more consistently felt in Scotland than in England. Studies focusing on HEFCE TQA have found that the reputation related performance pressure was greater for those institutions with greater standing because they had the most to lose (Brennan and Shah, 2000a) and that there was less pressure on post-1992 universities to claim excellence (Henkel, 2000). The current research does not find such a distinction in Scotland. Across the sector, institutions and departments believed that their provision was of a high quality and that assessment would confirm this. Although some institutions were at certain times more focused than others, a pre-1992 and post-1992 distinction was not evident.

Although generally pre-1992 universities took more centralised preparatory measures, this may have been owed to having a greater pre-TQA level of devolution than post-1992 universities. Thus such action reflected an increased need for co-ordination rather than a greater pressure to perform well. The telling issue in terms of the enhanced institutional focus that developed across the sector regarding performance, was not the management approach adopted but rather the extent to which institutions made a conscious decision, often spurred on by key individuals, to put into place an institutionally-appropriate approach, be it corporate or devolved.

The current study supports previous assertions, principally from England, that the external environment had an impact on university management approaches as institutions have sought to address issues. Although Brennan and Shah (2000a) note that quality assessment is only one of several policy issues, the current research concurs with Henkel's (2000) consideration that the external assessment of learning

and teaching (in the form of Institutional Audit and HEFCE TQA) had in itself a substantial impact.

The current study supports Henkel's assertion that external assessment had an increasingly explicit influence on internal quality assurance approaches. However, whereas Henkel found that audit and assessment particularly influenced structures and procedures in older institutions and that within these institutions there was a strong focus on the need to manage performance, the current research indicates that although a consistent form of approach did not apply across the sector and the level of institutional support varied, this was not along pre/post 1992 lines.

Indeed, although the current research concurs with Henkel's findings that pre-1992 universities recognised that there was a greater need for a central role, it highlights that post-1992 universities also learned that there was a need to underline departmental responsibility. Although external assessment had a similar impact across the sector, this did not mean that this took the same form in all institutions. Universities acted in the manner that they felt was most appropriate to their individual structure and culture.

Several authors have identified the beneficial impact of preparation. Research in England (McDowell et al, 1997; Henkel, 2000) has indicated that necessary preparation, in particular self-assessment, had a stimulus that went further than the external review itself. The wider value of preparation for external assessment has also been evidenced in research regarding SHEFC TQA (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998). Further, the link between preparation and departmental teambuilding has been noted by research in both Scotland (Drennan, 2000) and England (Henkel 1997, 2000). The results of the current study support these findings.

Also supported is Henkel's assertion that there was a greater awareness of the importance of the student experience and that new levels of understanding and mutual interest could be created in departments. There is also support for Drennan's (2000) SHEFC TQA finding that preparation was a valuable source of staff

development, with peer reviewers being the greatest beneficiaries. This concurs with comments from expert practitioners (Clark P, 1997) and research regarding HEFCE TQA (McDowell et al, 1997). Indeed, the assertion by McDowell et al that HEFCE reviewers benefited from viewing the practices of others and that these experiences frequently led to changes to assurance and enhancement systems and documentation, is also supported.

With regard to the rationale for participation as peer reviewers, the current study has found that preparation was the core but not the sole reason. For example, a genuine interest in teaching was also evidenced. This supports the HEFCE TQA findings of McDowell et al (1997).

Whilst institutions and departments accrued varying benefits from external assessment preparation and experience, the most consistently positive impact was the increased focus given to learning and teaching. This supports research into external assessment in Scotland (Sharp et al, 1997; Drennan, 2000), England (McDowell et al, 1997; Henkel, 2000) and Europe (Brennan, 1999). Amongst the various elements that contribute to this increased focus, the current study supports the findings of the HEFCE TQA research by McDowell et al that external assessment underlined the importance of learning and teaching issues and encouraged increased commitment. The current research also supports Henkel's HEFCE TQA findings that with the greater focus on learning and teaching came an increased awareness of the importance of student needs, as noted above.

Whilst some aspects of the research results have been previously evidenced by the work of others, it is emphasised that such studies have a research focus differing from the current study. As is evident from the research results, the current study identifies that internal and external factors, such as, but not exclusively, academic professionalism and the pressure to perform well in external assessments, have over time created an environment within the sector, institutions and departments that has fostered the enhancement or revitalisation of the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.

As noted, elements of the results support existing research and literature. In terms of the cultural impact of external assessment, Brennan and Shah (2000a) assert that influencing factors can be experience of self-evaluation and effects of internal institutional quality assurance approaches. Further, Gordon (2002a) considers that review visits and peer reviewer participation have brought gains in the form of a constructive professional dialogue.

Regarding cultural impact, Brennan and Shah (2000a) have highlighted that quality assurance related cultural change could be a slow process. They also found that cultural change was more evident at the centre of the institution and noted the possibility that it may take the socialisation of a new generation of academics to fully embed such a cultural change at departmental level. Indeed, Brennan and Shah's research found that although external quality assurance brought an improved attitude to teaching, there remained some departmental resistance to institutional initiatives, owing to traditional departmental autonomy.

The current study draws a different conclusion but in doing so notes that the Brennan and Shah study had a different focus and the current discussion merely relates to overlapping elements. The research results show that, vitally, although there was cultural change, this was in the sense of allowing an existing, genuine focus, perhaps previously buried under workload and research pressure, to operate and develop more fully. A culture was not created nor was a contradictory culture substituted. Rather, an existing culture was enhanced or revitalised. Moreover, given that beliefs were not changed but were given encouragement and room to breathe, this process was not a slow one. However, the considerable period of time that subject level assessment operated during was important, for the maintenance of external pressure/presence ensured that internal focus was retained and did not revert to the previous scenario.

Regarding evidence of cultural change in the centre of institutions and in departments, the current study shows that any slow movement was more related to over-confidence or objections to the external policy/process (a point noted elsewhere

by Brennan Shah, 2000b) than departmental autonomy based objections to institutional endeavours. Indeed, such initiatives by and large sought to underline departmental responsibility, though balanced with suitable central oversight.

The current study does support Brennan and Shah's (2000a) argument that indirect impacts such as cultural change are more fundamental and lasting than direct impacts that perhaps follow from report recommendations. The major benefit was not isolated mechanistic change but rather long-term enhancement or revitalisation. Additionally, it is argued that where mechanistic change occurred, perhaps initially to ensure appropriate performance, its retention or revision was subsequently drawn from reflection as part of the enduring revitalised learning and teaching focus. A prime example of this is the development and continuing evolution of the balance between institutional and departmental responsibility.

It is evident from the above discussion that the aspects of the current study overlap with those of existing research but that the thesis's first proposition, set out at the beginning of this chapter, has not been previously addressed.

8.3.2 The Influence Across a Sector of Culturally Distinct Universities

As presented in section 8.2, the following two key themes emerged from research into the proposition that influence of external assessment impacted across a sector of culturally distinct universities:

4. Perceptions of institutional cultures indicated that the sector was made up of culturally distinct universities. The variance in the institutional research/teaching focus and the approach to the balance between institutional overview and departmental responsibility regarding the quality assurance of learning and teaching supported this.
5. The occurrence of a level of convergence across the sector regarding approaches to the quality assurance of learning and teaching is a further indication that the influence of external assessment has been sector-wide.

Given that the existing research has not addressed the issue of the catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, it follows that no consideration has been made of whether this applied across a sector of culturally distinct institutions. However, there are some elements of other studies that can be linked to this proposition.

Although Drennan's (2000) research focus differed from the current study, the scope of the research did cover all thirteen Scottish universities. Accordingly, Drennan's assertion, noted earlier, that external audit and assessment created greater awareness of learning and teaching issues, applies across the sector. Although, the current study sees this awareness as being broader and longer lasting than Drennan considered, it is supportive of these findings.

Regarding the distinctiveness of institutions, although Drennan does not focus in the same manner on cultures, the context to that research establishes that the Scottish sector is distinct and acknowledges the differing origins and missions of its constituent institutions. Further, the Sharp et al (1997) research on SHEFC TQA found that views from across the sector were not split across pre-1992 and post-1992 university lines. This implies that a distinction could have been expected and also underlines that SHEFC TQA was received in a similar manner across the sector.

It is evident from the limited overlap with previous research that the thesis's second proposition, set out at the beginning of this chapter, has not been previously addressed.

8.3.3 Further Influence: Impediments and Requirements

As presented in section 8.2, the following four key themes emerged from research into the proposition that for external assessment to have continuing beneficial influence, ownership of assurance and enhancement must be instilled at the subject level. This builds upon a background that highlights both the prevalence of research primacy and negative perspectives of external quality assessment processes.

6. Although it has had a positive influence the acceptance of external assessment remains fragile.
7. Further, negative aspects of external assessment may impede such processes from further aiding the enhancement of the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision.
8. This is compounded by the continued focus on research and the resulting financial and status rewards that strong performance can bring to institutions, departments and individuals.
9. For the continued development of the focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision an appropriate system, that instils ownership of quality assurance and enhancement with subject level academics, is needed.

Although the fragile acceptance of external assessment is perhaps illustrated by negative perceptions of the processes, there is comparatively little research on acceptance itself. Whilst the evaluations of SHEFC TQA have indicated that institutions have questioned the need for more externality (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998) and survey respondents have declared various preferences, each of which sought to reduce the level of externality (Sharp et al, 1997), the current study has directly established that acceptance is fragile.

Regarding negative perceptions, it is important to underline that these related to the value of the process rather than the acceptance of the policy. Whilst it could be argued that it may be difficult for opponents of policy to have a positive view of the subsequent process adopted, when discussing the negative perceptions of the processes it is important to emphasise that the overwhelming majority of participants freely identified benefits. Indeed, although there was a strong body of opinion that detriments outweighed benefits, most participants considered in detail the balance between the two.

Previous research (e.g. Sharp et al, 1997; Henkel, 2000) has found that negative elements of the processes were stronger than the positive aspects. The current study also supports previous research (Bauer and Henkel, 1999) that indicated that the burden associated with the processes was the key detriment and that there was a perceived opportunity cost linked to this. This also supports commentary on external assessment from Grant and Dickinson (2002).

Moreover, the research results also evidence further negative perspectives highlighted by previous research. For example, McDowell et al (1997) highlighted that in some instances poor results could be detrimental to morale and that positive results could inhibit change. The consistency of judgements, a critical point, is also addressed by the literature. Sharp et al (1997) found that there was low confidence that separate teams would come to the same judgement and Clark's (1997) commentary on concerns over consistency was that peer review would always be subjective and that the best aim would be that the process was carried out consistently.

Whilst the current study does not assess the level of inconsistency or consider reasons for this, it does concur that there are negative perspectives regarding lack of consistency in judgements. Linking with this, the current study also supports Drennan's (2000) research findings that negative perceptions of the process also applied to the failure of some peer reviewers to be mission sensitive in their considerations and subsequent judgements.

As well as identifying negative perspectives as possible impediments to further beneficial influence from external assessment, the current study also highlights the strong focus on research, and its link to rewards, as a hurdle. Although previous studies have not considered the focus on research in the same context as the current study, there are overlapping elements. The current study supports the widely held views that research has primacy over teaching (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Jenkins, 1995) and that research performance heavily informs promotion judgements (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Drennan, 2000). Further, this study also supports assertions that

staff perceive that research performance is the route to promotion (Court, 1998) and that it is difficult to evaluate teaching contributions (Becher and Kogan, 1992; Drennan, 2000).

The research also supports the view that the prevailing spotlight on research can be detrimental to the focus on learning and teaching (Brennan and Shah, 2000a) and that research related rewards encourage research primacy (Jenkins, 1995). Henkel's (2000) view that institutions have a genuine interest in teaching but understandably follow the considerable incentives tied to research performance is supported.

Further, the current study supports Drennan's (2000) finding that TQA acted as a limited counterweight to the pressures of RAE performance but concurs with Henkel's (2000) view that the RAE undermines the ability of external accountability to raise the status of learning and teaching activities against research.

With the negative perceptions of aspects of external assessment and the reality of research primacy, the current study found that it was felt that the most effective way forward would be to instil ownership of assurance and enhancement with subject level academics. The research results indicate that this would mean that such activities would have a greater relevance and it would also help avoid much of the accountability-autonomy conflict. Although the literature abounds with comments and views advocating the path that external quality assessment/accountability should follow, much of this is based on opinion rather than research.

The thesis has demonstrated that although Government, agencies, and the university sector, sought a workable balance between accountability and autonomy that would provide assurance but also foster enhancement, the environment was not entirely conducive to this. Clark (1997), as noted in Chapter Two, has commented that subject level assessment was introduced into a hostile environment which did not bode well for its reception, support, and success. Further, SHEFC TQA related research has indicated that it was difficult to balance developmental and

accountability aims (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998) and also to sufficiently encourage enhancement (Drennan, 2000).

Contextual documentation and the research results support Sharp et al's (1997) findings that SHEFC TQA was viewed as being externally imposed. Bringing this perception together with the potentially hostile environment in which external assessment was intended to come together with enhancement, academic ownership of quality assurance and enhancement is clearly a key issue.

The research results support both commentator views and research (Drennan, 2000; Sharp et al 1997) that processes need to be viewed as being credible and owned rather than being perceived as being core to an accountability agenda seeking compliance rather than development. It concurs with Drennan's (2000) assertion that enhancement will be best aided by empowerment and encouragement. Of course, establishing a need and satisfying it are two different things. Indeed, in commenting even at the early stages of TQA, the then SHEFC Director of Teaching and Learning, highlighted the need for quality assurance and enhancement to be a co-operative exercise.

Not only could ownership aid enhancement but it could also work against the development of a compliance culture, a commonly voiced fear amongst commentators. Given the importance of performance (Morley, 2002), a hollow response is a recognised danger but the results of the current study did not indicate over-compliance or excessive compartmentalisation (Henkel, 2000). Where compartmentalisation or compliance occurs, departments see the task as being primarily administrative rather than academic, and the process has less opportunity to influence learning and teaching issues. Whilst Drennan (2000) considered that TQA encouraged compliance, the current study viewed this in terms of institutions and departments undertaking necessary preparatory tasks but, linking with their professional approach, this was not a hollow pretence, and learning and teaching issues were genuinely considered and addressed. Indeed, as found by Brennan and Shah (2000a), although there was resistance to the processes and departments may

have been selective in the elements that they adopted in the long-term, the increased focus on learning and teaching was appreciated by many. However, given the strength and distinctiveness of disciplinary cultures, it is clearly evident that the potential exists for departments to comply in a manner that will not produce any benefit, as found by Henkel (2000).

The importance of fostering ownership at the subject level is paramount because, given the widely acknowledged strength of departmental cultures (e.g. Becher, 1989; Clark B, 2001), acceptance of processes or policy by the sector does not necessarily bring within it departmental level ownership. Further, a danger acknowledged within the research results is that a gulf could grow between institutions and their departments if ownership and responsibility is not retained at the subject level. For example, although their study found no such link, Brennan and Shah (2000a) recognised the possibility that institutional approaches could be perceived as representing external rather than internal values.

The research results of the current study concur with this and emphasise the need to satisfy external pressures in a manner that keeps institutions and departments working to the same purposes in a manner accepted as relevant to learning and teaching activity at the subject level. Indeed, research regarding HEFCE TQA concluded that the challenge was to “*maintain the rigorous assurance of quality whilst maximising the potential for quality enhancement*” (McDowell et al 1997, p.10) and SHEFC TQA related research (Evaluation Associates Ltd, 1998) indicated that there would always be tension but that an appropriate balance must be achieved. An appropriate balance could also counter the danger noted in the research results and highlighted by Henkel (2000) that the discharge of external accountability could be seen as a task for the centre of the university.

Again bringing the context of the research together with the results of the study, it could be argued that the foundation for a beneficial balance between external assurance and fostering ownership lies with agreement in the accountability-autonomy policy conflict. This has also been a frequent topic of debate amongst

experienced commentators. For example, Gordon (2002b) has underlined the need for a negotiated commitment, through constructive dialogue, from Government, agencies and the institutions, to foster subject level ownership and ultimately bring development rather than compliance. Gordon acknowledges that discourse is seldom value-free but calls for a constructive dialogue which in Dearlove's (2002) terms would "*transcend the collegiality/managerialism dichotomy*" (p.9).

The research results support these calls and there is some evidence that relationships between agencies and the Scottish university sector have developed along these lines in recent years, especially with regard to the development of Enhancement Led Institutional Review. The continuing challenge is to achieve a working balance that negates both fears that universities put their own interests above those of the user in their reluctance to independently demonstrate their standards (Randall, 2002) and perceptions of external accountability being a "*quality assurance industry*" (Sutherland, 1997, p.25).

8.4 Conclusions and Implications

In the light of the summary of research results presented in Section 8.2, the above discussion highlights that the propositions, themes and results of the current study are largely distinct. Whilst aspects of overlap with other studies are evident, the central focus of the research – that external quality assessment has had a beneficial catalytic influence on the enhancement or revitalisation of institutional and departmental focus on the assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching, on a long-term basis – has not previously been addressed. Further, the research results clearly evidence that internal and external factors combined to create a suitable environment in which external assessment could have a beneficial catalytic influence.

Given that an existing institutional and departmental focus on the assurance and improvement of the quality of learning and teaching provision was evident, the enhancement or revitalisation of this focus is not considered to be a transformation. However, given the long-term, embedded nature of the enhancement, it is considered that what has occurred amounts to more than adaptive behaviour. Although adaptive

behaviour was clearly evident and a short-term increased focus was tied to this, internal and external factors combined to create, over time, an environment that led to a longer term embedded change. What is evident is that a stronger, beneficial enhancement has developed over time, rather than a short-term compliance-oriented, surface-level, adaptive behaviour designed solely to satisfy external scrutiny and achieve positive review results.

Essentially, external quality assessment has aided a long-term transition in the level of focus afforded to assurance and improvement of the quality of learning and teaching provision. It is noted that these policies and processes did not operate in a vacuum during this period and that institutions and the sector as a whole were open to a variety of internal and external environmental pressures and developments. Further, it is also recognised that continuing scrutiny both within institutions and emanating from PSBs means that it cannot be argued that the catalytic influence has not been supplemented or reinforced over time.

The contextual background to the research, detailed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, has underlined the importance of the accountability-autonomy conflict that continued throughout the 1992-2002 period. Sector responses to the Jarratt Report; the changing role of intermediary funding and quality assurance bodies; a falling unit of resource; rising student numbers; and an enlarged UK and Scottish university sector are examples of constituent factors in a tense state-sector relationship set in a managerialist context.

The further discussion of culture and managerialism in Chapter Three built on the higher education public policy background presented in Chapter Two. It is highlighted that internal environmental factors such as culture and professional status could resist externally driven change initiatives. Further, such initiatives could be seen as being the embodiment of state-sector managerialism and as fostering institution-department managerialism. Moreover, managerialism itself could be seen as attempting to limit the autonomy of institutions and the professional discretion of

staff, in effect curtailing their previously strong criteria and operational power to determine goals and how they would be achieved.

Detailed research on the existence and influence of managerialism in universities (e.g. Deem et al, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Brennan and Shah, 2000a; Kogan and Hanney, 2000) adds further detail to the higher education debate. Although the current study focuses on the distinct Scottish university sector, as noted in Chapter Two the rest of the UK was also embroiled in similar debates and faced with corresponding challenges. Accordingly, research focused on the experience of academics in England and their reactions to managerialism, which includes issues such as RAE and Institutional Audit as well as the assessment of learning and teaching at subject level, is considered when drawing implications from the research results of the current study.

Whilst the focus and initial contribution of the study are evidently distinct, a consideration of the research results in the light of the contextual background to the study and research related to this, clarifies the wider implications to be drawn. Whilst these implications can be related directly to the Scottish experience of external assessment, they can also be framed in the context of public and private sectors.

It is evident from this study that continuing and principled policy conflict regarding the imposition of an external assessment process of disputed relevance on a (semi) autonomous institution or sector will not necessarily fatally impede the process from having a beneficial catalytic impact. This is provided that internal and external factors combine, perhaps over time, to create a suitable environment for positive change. Further, this can occur across a sector of similar but culturally distinct institutions. However, it is also evident that processes may have only a limited impact and must evolve if there is to be a continuing benefit, given that internal and external factors that have combined to create an environment open to influence may change.

Internal environmental factors included professional identities and values, as well as organisational cultures and sub-cultures. External environmental factors included legislative obligations that also fostered changes in the market place. Given, as detailed in Chapter Three, that variants of these internal and external environmental factors exist in other sectors, the implications drawn for this study have relevance beyond the Scottish HE sector and quality assessment.

Chapter Three highlights that the public and private sectors have shared aspects of the current higher education experience in terms of resistance, particularly from professionals, to change often emanating from stakeholders exerting, and wishing to increase, their criteria and operation power. Such commonality in terms of the complex change interface that exists regarding internal and external environmental factors suggests that the implications drawn from the current research may have a bearing on other educational settings, the public and private sectors, and change management theory in general.

In terms of the Scottish university sector, and indeed the UK higher education sector, the managerialist tensions between institutions and Government have been clearly evident during the last twenty years. In addition to documentary evidence charting the accountability-autonomy conflict, research (e.g. Kogan and Hanney, 2000) has underlined the intensity regarding what Henkel refers to as the rise of the 'Evaluative State'. Despite such a backdrop, the current study has shown that a beneficial catalytic influence can occur but that evolution is essential.

It is argued that a longer term effectiveness of accountability policies and related assessment processes will be attained if acceptance of the policy and process are achieved at departmental level. Acceptance at sector or institutional level does not necessarily bring with it departmental acceptance given the potential divide created by a conflict over institution-department managerialism.

For example, research by Deem et al (2000) has highlighted that the collegial-managerialist tension within universities, in terms of the interface between

institutional management and academic departments, does exist. Further, they note that despite inclusive intentions, actions of the 'cadre' of senior management can be seen as contrary to the values of staff. Thus it is argued that there is a very real possibility that institutional acceptance of an externally initiated policy or process may conflict with feelings at the department level and the opportunity for a beneficial influence may be weakened. Indeed, not only might such institutional acceptance not be mirrored at departmental level but the perception that an institution is acting in a managerialist fashion, as the agent of external powers rather than the protector of internal values, may be a further impediment.

A good test case in terms of higher education is Scotland's adoption of the Enhancement Led Institutional Review mechanism. Through much dialogue Scotland appears to have created a system that, unlike in England, has brought acceptance from both sides of the accountability-autonomy divide. SHEFC, the QAA Scottish Office, Universities Scotland, and the individual institutions themselves seem to have agreed on the way forward for external quality assurance. However, given the infancy of the mechanism it remains to be seen whether such institutional acceptance will be met at departmental level. All parties seem to be aware that this is a potential problem, thus sector wide Enhancement Themes have been established with the aim of bringing the wider academic community productively into this new found partnership. The acid test is whether this multi-faceted approach works at different levels.

Of course, departmental level acceptance does not mean that a policy is appropriate or the process will be effective. Acceptance could be borne from the offer of a 'light touch', resulting in compliance in exchange for minimal burden. Rather, what is necessary is acceptance based upon the relevance of the process and an underlying recognition of the appropriateness of the broader policy.

The power of the 'invisible colleges' in higher education has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Becher and Kogan, 1992) and it is recognised that perceived challenges to departmental autonomy can be met with hostility (e.g. Kogan and

Hanney 2000). Whilst the Government can require that policies are implemented and processes adopted, Henkel (2000) has highlighted that threats to academic professionalism may lead to such tasks being 'compartmentalised' and treated as separate from academic work. Thus the challenge is to gain departmental level ownership.

Indeed, although Trow asserts that accountability and quality assurance can come together in an effective manner when serious, recurrent internal reviews "*with real teeth and real consequences*" (Trow, 1996b, p.322) are twinned with the external monitoring of such procedures, the dangers of compliance and a lack of ownership can be drawn from his wider analysis of UK university accountability to the Funding Councils:

"...it is accountability in name only. It much more resembles the reports of a civil service in a defeated country to an occupying power, or by state-owned industrial plants and farms to a central government in a command economy. In all such cases, the habits of truth-telling erode...When information flowing up the line powerfully affects the reputation and resources flowing down from the centre, then we know that those reports become less and less exercises in discovery or truth telling, and more and more public relations documents which are, shall we say, parsimonious with the truth, especially of awkward truths...But accountability depends on truth-telling. So a central problem is how to create a system of accountability that does not punish truth-telling and reward the appearance of achievement" (p.314).

Of course achieving acceptance is not a simple task given the opportunity for academic staff to turn their back even on institutionally accepted policies and, for some, the propensity to assume that management is fundamentally detrimental to academic endeavour (Watson, 2000b). It remains difficult to separate process from policy; increased accountability from decreased autonomy and professional discretion; and reporting obligations to Government from diminishing institutional

and departmental criteria and operational power. Similarly, it remains difficult to separate rational objections from blinded self-interest and necessary institutional responses to external pressures from institution-department managerialism.

It seems that the challenge is, as suggested by Thorne and Cuthbert (1996), to lead rather than attempt to manage academics. Indeed, despite perceptions that some academics hold onto a mythological collegiality that never truly existed, Henkel (2000) has found academia to be a “*relatively adaptive profession*” (8), seeing its response to external pressures on traditional autonomy as resulting in ‘reprofessionalisation’ rather than ‘deprofessionalisation’ (Fulton 2001).

Of course, whilst every endeavour should be made to achieve ownership of processes at the departmental level, a further impediment to policies or processes having a beneficial catalytic influence is that, in terms of higher education, there does not seem to be a coherent public policy portfolio. The primacy of research in terms of academic attitudes and Government-sourced funding is all too evident and could continue to impede the focus on learning and teaching. Acceptance and ownership could be worth little if the pressure of research performance and the reality of the current rewards systems, at numerous levels, remains so strong. The lack of a coherent public policy portfolio is likely to bring conflict in terms of priority and importance at sector, institutional and departmental levels.

Whilst the Government appears at pains to act upon the burden of accountability that the university sector continually testifies to, the work of bodies such as the Better Regulation Task Force (2002) and the higher education specific Better Regulation Review Group (2003) will achieve little unless the core policies offering direction and incentive, rather than the regulatory sub-policies, are considered as part of a single package. It is argued that for this to be achieved both the Government and the university sector must consider where in their priorities learning and teaching lies.

8.5 Limitations

Limitations of the research in terms of its methodology are discussed in Chapter Four. Given the consistency of the results drawn from the different sets of interviews, questions about the research should not be focused on what has been found but perhaps what has not been considered. Interviews with sector and institutional informants gave a detailed and largely consistent view. The single institution case study that provided the Head of Department/Peer Reviewer perspective added further depth and also corroboration to this data. However, given that interviews were not undertaken with 'shop floor' academics, it could be argued that a dimension is missing from the current study.

However, although the importance of the individual academic is not discounted, the current research has not undertaken such field research given that it seeks to ascertain behaviour and perceptions of behaviour at aggregate higher levels. Whilst the current research acknowledges the importance of individuals in relation to any change process, departmental and subject affiliation and loyalty is also recognised. Indeed, it is in departments that Becher's (1989) tribes exist and Henkel's (2000) academic identities are formed and maintained. Chapter Three's presentation of the levels of analysis and Chapter Four's discussion of the research design have justified the selection of interviewee categories in terms of the need for a consistently high quality of relevant data to be obtained. This required participants with broad sector/institutional/departmental/individual experience over the extended external quality assessment period and underlined the utility to this research of the dual senior academic/manager role of Heads of Departments.

The dual role of Heads of Departments was evident in their participation as peer reviewers. This was sometimes in response to encouragement from senior management, thereby fulfilling a managerial role, and sometimes entirely without encouragement but with the aim of aiding departmental preparation, thus fulfilling a departmental academic role.

On another point, although the interviews covered the same core ground, individual interviews explored particular avenues in an effort to gain as much relevant data as possible. The aim was to gain insight without losing validity. However, this qualitative approach meant that responses have been categorised and generalised rather than analysed in a quantitative manner. It is argued that the additional insight obtained outweighs the absence of tables depicting percentile responses to individual questions. The nature of the approach used is akin to that used by Becher (1989) in his exploration of academic tribes and territories, in which he likened his study to a detective investigation, piecing relevant evidence together to form a wider picture and enable conclusions to be drawn. Further, the use of qualitative language is mirrored in related studies (Henkel, 2000; Drennan 2000; Morley 2003).

8.6 Options for Further Research

Given the limited literature in this area, there remains considerable scope for further research to be undertaken. The new phase of external accountability of learning and teaching, embodied in the QAA Enhancement Led Institutional Review methodology, offers a number of opportunities to build upon the work of this thesis.

An assessment of the impact of the ELIR process on institutions and departments could be made with a view to establishing whether the process has had any influence on the wider academic community or if it is solely dealt with by the centre of the university. Secondly, research could be undertaken into the level of involvement of the wider academic community in the Enhancement Themes that are an integral part of the SHEFC/QAA methodology, and the influence that participation has at the subject level. Thirdly, research could be undertaken into the continuing methodology discussions between SHEFC, the QAA Scottish Office, and the Scottish university sector to consider how the wider policy debate impacts upon the evolving ELIR process.

There is also scope for further work in terms of institutional and sector-wide change. The developments associated with TQA and Subject Review can be seen as an initiative by the Funding Council that brought about institutional change. Although

the work described here has shown a sector wide influence, it is also evident that in addressing related issues such as the development of internal quality assurance systems, there was diversity of interpretation amongst institutions and departments in terms of determining the best way forward.

Internal and external factors came together to create an environment that fostered change. However, this scenario was neither engineered nor identified at the outset but rather evolved in a rather serendipitous manner. Thus, in terms of initiating change and achieving desired results, there are several highly relevant and inter-linked questions. For example, what are the factors that suggest that institutional change is needed? This question could be asked from within an institution or at the level of the Funding Council. In the latter case, it could apply to an entire sector.

Moving on from this, what are the key principles associated with the creation of institutional or sector-wide change? How can internal and external factors be defined at the outset as those essential to creating an appropriate environment for change? And vitally, how can change be monitored and measured without losing ownership and acceptance?

8.7 Summary

By summarising the research results and comparing relevant aspects with previous research, this chapter has confirmed that the focus, propositions, themes and results of the study are distinct.

The research results established that external quality assessment, in the form of SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review, acted as catalyst in the enhancement or revitalisation of the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching provision, on a long-term basis. Further, this influence occurred across a Scottish university sector inhabited by culturally distinct institutions.

However, the benefits to be gained from SHEFC TQA and QAA Subject Review

were strongly countered by negative perspectives of the relevance and burden of the processes. Such negative perspectives and the substantial focus on research performance could erode the benefits gained. Thus, for the institutional and departmental focus on assuring and improving the quality of learning and teaching to continue to be positively influenced by external processes on a long-term basis, future approaches must instil ownership of quality assurance with subject level academics while retaining a level of institutional assessment sufficient to satisfy the existing external accountability obligation.

It is highlighted that the research is set within a context of conflicting internal and external environments, where rapidly and radically changing public policy and perspectives of state-sector and institution-department managerialism made debates on external accountability policy and external quality assessment process more than the sum of their parts.

It is argued that the research results have implications that extend beyond the Scottish university sector and quality assessment, given that the results can also be considered in the light of the complex internal and external environments that the public and private sectors, as well as the university sector, experience.

It is considered that continuing and principled policy conflict regarding the imposition of an externally driven change process of disputed relevance on a (semi) autonomous institution or sector will not necessarily fatally impede the process from having a beneficial catalytic impact. This is provided that factors internal and external to the institution combine to create an appropriate environment. Further, this can occur across a sector of similar but culturally distinct institutions. However, it is also evident that processes may have only a limited impact and must evolve if there is to be a continuing benefit, given that internal and external factors that have combined to create an environment open to influence may change.

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**Scottish Higher Education
Funding Council**

Quality Assessors' Handbook

October 1993

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1. Introduction

This Handbook explains the duties of quality assessors appointed by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC). It also seeks to provide them with advice on how best to discharge these duties in practice. In this first edition of the Handbook, advice offered arises from the experience of operating procedures in the first assessment round undertaken: this round covered Economics, and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Other subjects ('cognate areas', in the jargon) may well have their peculiarities which will require assessors to adapt the advice given here, or indeed to dispense with some of it altogether.

Quality assurance procedures within institutions depend heavily on documentation; SHEFC procedures on quality assessment are no exception. The Handbook should be read in conjunction with the set of documents, QA/1 - 12, produced by SHEFC's Quality Assessment Branch, and reproduced as annexes to this handbook. The use of these will be explained as the need arises, but for introductory purposes assessors should read documents QA/1 - 4, which cover the background to assessment, the analytical framework for assessment, the guidance given to institutions when carrying out 'self-assessment', and the nature of the other documents which institutions are asked to submit.

Quality assessment: the SHEFC approach (QA/1) explains the genesis of the quality assessment procedures in the 1992 Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act. It also distinguishes between these procedures, which are the responsibility of the Funding Council and its English and Welsh counterparts, and those of 'quality audit', which is undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Council, and 'quality control' which is the responsibility of the individual universities and colleges. The document outlines the main features of quality assessment. Two in particular should be noted:

- the '*quality framework*' which has been accepted, for present purposes, as the definition of quality in higher education, together with the four-point 'quality assessment scale' by which providers will be classified. This framework is further elaborated in QA/2.
- the *self-assessment process*, whereby institutions engage in a critical appraisal of their own teaching in the subject ('cognate area') under review.

2. Organisation of the Assessment Process

The detailed implementation of quality assessment is the responsibility of the Quality Assessment Branch of SHEFC's Teaching and Learning Directorate. The Branch presently consists of secondees from HM Inspectorate and from

higher education institutions, supported by permanent staff. Members of the Branch, however, are not necessarily experts in the cognate area under assessment. This expertise is supplied by the specialist assessors, of whom there are three varieties: lead assessors, academic assessors and industrial assessors.

- *Lead assessors* are academic specialists in the cognate area who take responsibility for overseeing the whole programme of assessment in that area, supported by the staff of the Directorate. They may be seconded from their institutions full-time or part-time for a period of months, to cover the whole process of preparing for assessment (including the scrutiny of the self-assessment document), organising institutional visits, and writing up reports.
- *Academic assessors* are also specialists from the institutions working in the cognate area, but make their services available on a day-by-day basis for visiting particular institutions, for training and for report writing. While they are drawn predominantly from other Scottish higher educational institutions, a number come from institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These assessors provide a necessary element of independence and neutrality.
- *Industrial assessors* are drawn from outside the academic world, and represent broader vocational and social interests which will be served by graduates qualified in the cognate area. Their role is to focus in particular on the extent to which the qualification matches these broader requirements.

Taking an overview of the whole assessment process is the *Quality Assessment Committee (QAC)*. This body has the remit to advise Council on the conduct of its responsibilities for quality assessment. The Committee reviews the timetable for assessment of cognate areas, the methods used and the reports drawn up by the Directorate, prior to their submission to Council. The terms of reference of the Committee and its current membership are set out in QA/11.

3. The Assessment Cycle

Between January and March of each year, SHEFC announces the programme for the forthcoming academic session, and invites institutions to submit self-assessments by the end of June in each of the cognate areas included in the programme. During April and May, SHEFC recruits lead assessors for each cognate area, and invites nominations from the institutions for other academic assessors.

The number of academic assessors who will be required depends on the number of visits which have to be undertaken. Generally, a larger pool of

assessors will be recruited than the number required for any one visit. This allows for replacement of assessors for reasons of illness, or because of prior commitments or to avoid conflicts of interest (for example, where assessors would be reviewing provision in their own departments, or in departments with which their own was in close competition). It also permits two assessments to take place simultaneously. In those teams where the lead assessors are not themselves involved, they will have to delegate the role of team leader to another assessor. While this is often necessary for purposes of scheduling, it gives rise to the risk that teams with different memberships will make inconsistent judgements. An adequate training programme should help to minimise this risk; and to reduce it further, team leaders require to keep in very close contact with the lead assessor. It will also help if each subject assessor attends at least three visits, and if assessors from furth of Scotland move about between 'east coast' and 'west coast' teams.

During the period April-June staff of the Directorate's Quality Assessment Branch may be invited to visit institutions to advise them on the completion of the self-assessment document. This document is normally submitted by institutions to SHEFC at the end of June.

Between June and September there are two priorities. The first is undertaken by lead assessors and SHEFC staff: it involves the scrutiny of self-assessments to determine which institutions should be visited by the assessment team. All who claim 'Excellence' will receive a visit. The proportion of other institutions which are visited reflects several factors, including the number in each assessment category and the quality of the self-assessment documents. In the first two rounds of assessment it was decided to visit all institutions. The second task is to arrange with each institution when it would be convenient to visit. A briefing session is held for lead assessors in early July, concerned chiefly with the scrutiny process, and training sessions for academic assessors are also planned. In 1993-94, the first training session, for assessors in engineering, chemistry and physics, will take place in October; the second, for assessors in Earth Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, and Computer Studies, will be held in November.

Once an institution has been selected for an assessment visit, the sequence of events is as follows:

- *The pre-visit:* the lead assessor will complete form QA/7, guided by QA/6, listing the points arising from the self-assessment which the visiting team may wish to pursue with the institution. The lead assessor will make a 'pre-visit' to discuss these issues with representatives of the department to be assessed, and will agree a representative sample of teaching provision and student work which will be the basis of the assessment. This meeting will also provide an occasion to discuss a variety of practical arrangements to be made for the assessment visit, covering such matters as group meetings with staff and students. Where the lead assessor cannot take part in a visit,

he or she should still accompany the team leader, or arrange for a member of the SHEFC Directorate to do so (for further details, see Section 9 and Annex QA/5).

- *Scrutiny by the assessors:* during the period immediately prior to the visit, the Quality Assessment Branch will send members of the assessment team the principal documents supplied by the institution. Assessors are required to devote two days to preparation for the visit, by scrutinising these documents and coming to a team meeting on-site at the institution during the afternoon and, if necessary, evening preceding the visit. At this meeting, the QA/7 document is modified in the light of the comments of the other assessors, and a more detailed (but still provisional) agenda for the assessment visit is worked out.
- *Assessment visit:* the visit will last for two or three days, depending upon the extent and complexity of provision. There will normally be three or four academic assessors and one industrial assessor in the assessment team. The team will engage in scrutiny of facilities and of student work, observation of teaching, and discussions with both students and members of staff. At the end of the visit, there will be a final discussion at which assessors will come to a preliminary decision on the quality of provision under the various aspects of the assessment framework. Such decisions are formed as far as possible on the basis of a consensus view. No feedback is given to the institution at this stage.
- *Report writing:* following the visit, assessors are allotted two days for writing up their observations. These individual reports will be collated, normally by the team leader, whose job it is to reflect the major points in a single report, which will be circulated amongst assessors for comment. When a draft has been agreed it will go to the Quality Assessment Branch to be edited for house-style prior to being sent to senior management at the institution to comment on matters of factual accuracy (details of the final assessment verdict, however, are not sent at this time). After any necessary amendments, the report will be submitted to the Quality Assessment Committee, and subsequently to Council. When Council has accepted the report, it will then be prepared for publication.

Finally, the lead assessor will produce a report in the cognate area for inclusion in SHEFC's annual report covering all the cognate areas reviewed in the course of the year.

4. Scrutiny

As an assessor, your first task will be to scrutinise the material sent to you by the Quality Assessment Branch of SHEFC. This material will include the self-assessment document submitted by the institution, together with some of the supplementary detail which accompanies it (usually, course reviews and external examiners' reports). To assist in the scrutiny process, you will find it useful to have QA/2, QA/3, QA/4 and QA/6 ready to hand.

QA/2 gives a listing of the 11 aspects of the quality framework, together with the details of the elements of each aspect which are relevant to quality; a briefer version of the content of the aspects is given in QA/3, which provides institutions with guidance on how to complete the self-assessment document. QA/4 gives an indication of the further sources of information which institutions have been asked to submit, and which you will be able to refer to on the visit itself.

A popular brief definition of quality is 'fitness for purpose'. Aspect A therefore requires to be scrutinised with particular care, since it is the statement of 'Aims' which specifies the purpose of the provision. The absence of certain elements may be entirely justifiable, as long as these elements would be inappropriate to the aims being pursued by the institution within this cognate area. A course in medieval history, for example, may quite properly make no provision for work-based learning. Similarly, we would expect to see closer links with industry and commerce in a programme entitled 'Business Economics' than in a more general economics programme; in turn, it would be reasonable to expect more external liaison in general economics than it would be in medieval history (although even in this latter case assessors would be looking for some evidence of contacts with outside bodies and perhaps with schools).

From time to time during the first round of assessments, some academics of the institutions being assessed, expressed the fear that assessors might try to impose their own preconceptions about the goals which ought to be pursued, rather than accepting the declared aims of the institutions themselves. This criticism may well recur in subsequent rounds. To ensure that it is without justification, assessors must pay very close attention to the stated aims, both of the institution, and of the department or course. It is not unknown for course documents to make strong claims for the vocational relevance of a course which is in fact being presented in a way which emphasises the intrinsic fascination of the discipline, without much regard to its external relevance. In such a case, you would be obliged, as an assessor, to draw attention to the mismatch between aims and methods of presentation. However, you would not be entitled to criticise a course for 'vocational irrelevance' if it made no claim to be pursuing vocational aims.

5. The Assessment Visit

Shortly before the assessment visit, the Quality Assessment Branch will let you know when, and where, to present yourself for the preliminary meeting, which will normally take place during the afternoon prior to the start of the first day of the visit, and will be held in the 'base room' allocated to the team at the institution.

Initial allocation of duties may have been suggested by the team leader prior to this meeting. As well as clarifying the issues to be explored on the visit, the meeting will agree the final allocation of duties amongst individual assessors (there may already have been some discussion of this between the team leader and other members). It is important, at this initial meeting, to speak your mind freely on your impressions from the documentation. There is a danger that the team may be railroaded into a premature and false consensus if the less assertive members allow the more assertive to dictate the agenda. Afterwards, you will have the opportunity to familiarise yourself with the location of the different buildings which you will have to visit in the course of the next two or three days. You may also be able to make contact with at least some of the staff whom you will wish to interview, or whose teaching you intend to observe, on subsequent days.

It is courteous to inform staff of your intention to sit in on particular classes; some institutions will particularly request that you do this. Some staff (not necessarily the worst lecturers, by any means) find the presence of an assessor inhibiting, and it is important to minimise the stress as far as possible. Also, for some classes (particularly small tutorial groups in a lecturer's room) there may be a seating problem if a visiting assessor has to be accommodated. It is better to work out a solution to any such problem before the class begins. Yet another advantage of seeing the lecturer beforehand is that you may wish to take the opportunity to suggest that the class might terminate 10 or 15 minutes earlier to allow you to have a brief discussion with the students. This suggestion should be made tentatively, and not pushed if the staff member seems unhappy about it.

There are circumstances in which it will not be possible to give advance warning of a classroom visit, particularly where both assessors and lecturers have very busy schedules. If it is proving difficult to make contact with a lecturer in order to give advance warning of a classroom visit, he or she should be notified in writing through the departmental secretary, or informed of the classroom visit immediately prior to the start of the class.

If a staff member creates difficulties about your attempts to undertake any aspect of the assessment process, do not insist on your 'rights' as an assessor. Break off the engagement with a minimum of fuss and leave it to the lead assessor to take the matter up with the head of department. The emphasis should be on minimising confrontation.

You may find it helpful to keep in mind the following objectives and methods of approach for the different activities which make up assessment:

5.1 Observation of Teaching

This has several purposes. Most obviously, it allows you to check on whether classes actually take place at the times, and in the places scheduled. You will also get the opportunity to assess: the punctuality of the lecturer or tutor and of the students; student attendance, attentiveness and enthusiasm; the adequacy or otherwise of the classroom accommodation (points to look for include heating, lighting, air freshness, noise, acoustics, crowding, state of decor, and adequacy and comfort of seating arrangements). As far as the teaching itself is concerned, such matters as audibility, coherence, irritating mannerisms, clarity of exposition, mastery of subject, interest and enthusiasm conveyed, visibility and comprehensibility of visual aids (and the ability of the lecturer to master the technology), and encouragement of student participation may all be noted. Innovative methods are of particular interest, but note that SHEFC has no hostility to traditional teaching as such, nor is innovation valued for its own sake. In this context, the following comment in the Assessor Handbook produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England may be helpful:

A well-delivered lecture, in which a good rapport is established with the student group, and in which audio-visual aids are effectively used where relevant, is likely to be an excellent class (paragraph 30).

Because of the sensitivity of this aspect of assessment, which will be new and perhaps threatening to most members of staff, it is most important to observe certain procedures.

- *Do not take an active part in the class:* warn the lecturer or tutor beforehand that your role is purely one of observer and *not* of participant; and that it is important for the class to proceed, as far as possible, as if you were not there. Do not intervene to correct any errors which you think you may have spotted.
- *Avoid body language expressing boredom, incredulity, disagreement or contempt:* or indeed anything except polite interest.
- *Try to avoid late arrival or early departure:* even if the lecturer or tutor does not particularly want to have you there, it may be considered disruptive or discourteous if you are not present for the whole time. An exception to this rule may be made in laboratory or workshop situations where no distraction would be caused by arrivals and departures: this exception may also apply in large lecture theatres with a back exit, but preferably only after discussion with the lecturer. Also, on some visits it may simply not be possible to cover the range of

teaching to be observed if a full hour is devoted to each class. Again, forewarning of a late arrival or early departure would be courteous.

5.2 Discussions with Staff

Some assessors and some departments like to hold 'plenary' sessions for the whole department to meet the team; in other cases, the contact may be on a one-to-one basis only. However arranged, meetings with staff members serve several useful purposes. They may be used to test awareness of course (and, indeed, departmental and institutional) aims; to discuss innovative teaching or assessment methods, or to explore arguments for adhering to traditional methods; to test the depth of commitment to pastoral care, or to scholarly activity; to confirm details of organisational structure and monitoring or review systems, and to allow those who undertake administrative duties for the department to explain their roles.

It is important (although not always possible, given time exigencies) to have at least a few words with staff, to give them an opportunity to explain their approach to any teaching which you may have observed, or intend to observe. **It is not the function of assessment to offer critiques of teaching performance to individual staff;** and you should resist the temptation to do so, however overwhelming. Yet staff often feel that a single observation of teaching practice is likely to leave misleading impressions, unless it is situated in the context of the unit as a whole. It is only polite to allow them the opportunity to clarify such matters, and it may also help with the assessment process.

You may wish to arrange separate meetings with 'senior' and 'junior' or 'unpromoted' staff to receive different perspectives of the work of a department or section.

Two temptations which you should resist when interviewing staff members are:

- *Spending time pursuing topics of mutual scholarly interest:* this is a natural reaction when meeting a colleague, but the assessment visit is too short to permit such indulgences.
- *Revealing confidential information about the assessment exercise:* assessors may find themselves drawn into indiscretion if they make too unguarded a response to such innocent questions as 'How's it going, then?' It is particularly important not to make any comments whatsoever on any of the other assessments with which you may be involved.

5.3 Discussions with Students

It is normal practice to ask the Department to arrange one or several meetings with a representative sample of students, without staff being present. Such meetings give the opportunity to explain to students the purpose of the assessment exercise. They also allow assessors to check the effectiveness, from the student point of view, of a variety of elements of provision: pastoral care, course and careers advice, student representation on committees, responsiveness of staff to student problems, diligence of teachers, coherence of course structure, appropriateness of curriculum, and adequacy of library, laboratory, recreational, social, catering and accommodation facilities.

There are some advantages in having the student group and the team meet, in plenary session, before splitting into smaller groups, to pursue the problems of particular years or courses. Discussions between first and final year students, for example, may help to bring out to assessors the ways in which provision has been changing over time.

It is probably best to have the meeting with students around the middle of the visit, although this cannot always be arranged. By this time, assessors will have begun to form initial views of the strengths and weaknesses of the programmes, which they can test against the perceptions of the students. If the visit is not too late in the exercise, there will also be time to get back to staff to obtain their reactions to student comments.

Points to note include the following:

- *Check how the students came to be at the meeting:* were they selected by staff, or by virtue of their position as representatives on departmental committees; did they volunteer to attend this meeting, or were they co-opted by other students? These questions should not be taken to imply that departments will attempt to pack the meeting with 'trusties'. However, it is likely that students who have a 'representative' role in the structure may see things differently from the mass of students, and assessors should be alert to these differences in perspective. If the policy of meeting students at the end of 'observed' classes is followed, this will help to provide a cross-check on the comments made in the more formal meetings. The general rule is to try to draw on as wide and diverse a range of student opinion as possible.
- *Ask the Department for some biographical detail about the students:* are these the best in the year, or do they include those who are having difficulties?
- *Beware of axe-grinders:* this point is related to the previous one. Sometimes a student, or a clique of students, will see the assessors' visit as an opportunity to criticise the institution, the department or an

individual member of staff. Always cross-check the information which you are given.

- *Make allowance for unrealistic expectations:* a proactive approach to student feedback runs the risk of creating expectations of improvement which no department could possibly fulfil. Paradoxically, therefore, the more diligently staff seek out student problems, the more likely it is that students will complain of their response; while in departments where students are not encouraged to be critical, the question of non-response to complaints may not arise to the same extent.
- *Avoid critical remarks about the staff or the institution:* even if you agree with the criticisms by the students, maintain an air of interested neutrality. Quite properly, the students may well be debriefed by the institution after the meeting.

5.4 Facilities Viewed

The physical environment is a significant aspect of the whole student experience. It is worth commenting, therefore, on such matters as attractiveness or otherwise of the situation of the department; distances between departmental facilities or teaching rooms; state of decor, and standard of maintenance of buildings and plant; location of refectories or student union facilities; and adequacy of these facilities for the numbers of students to be accommodated.

In particular, have a close look at the following:

- *Libraries:* both the central facility and any departmental libraries or reading rooms should be visited. In order to avoid any unnecessary duplication of effort by assessment teams in different cognate areas, SHEFC staff will have made preliminary contact before the start of each year's cycle to obtain 'general' information on current library policy (evening or weekend access, short loans, provision of bibliographical assistance), and to identify the library representative in each cognate area whom the team should contact during the exercise. When visiting the library it is a good idea to take along the course reading lists and check for the presence of key texts, journals or collections of articles. The use of data retrieval systems may be regarded as a key transferable skill: does the library offer induction in these techniques in the cognate area under review? How closely do departmental staff liaise with library staff?
- *Laboratories and other practical facilities:* is equipment up-to-date, and of industry standard where relevant? Is technician support readily available for students? Are laboratories under-utilised, or is there a queue of unsatisfied customers? How open is access, and what are the safety implications? Are facilities well maintained and is there a policy

on planned maintenance and replacement? Do the laboratories reflect current thinking in terms of curriculum development?

- *Educational Development Unit or Media Centre:* how appropriate are the facilities for the cognate area under review? How often do staff use them to support teaching within this area?
- *Careers office:* again, this is a facility which will probably require a separate visit by teams in each cognate area, since different subject specialisms imply different problems and opportunities for graduates seeking employment. Careers officers may also be able to give some impression of the strength of vocational emphasis of particular courses.

5.5 Scrutiny of Student Work

Institutions will be asked to make available in the base room samples of the work undertaken by the students. This is a sensitive matter, since it is not the task of assessors to repeat, or challenge, the work of the external examiner (they may, of course, comment on the use made of the external in the institution's quality control procedures). It is important, therefore, that assessors should understand why they are looking at this material. The objectives of this scrutiny are:

- *To assess the match between student output and curriculum aims:* the external examiner is concerned with the extent to which examinations cover the syllabus and with the comparability of marking standards between the institution and elsewhere. The quality assessor, by contrast, is concerned with the indications which examination papers, coursework essays and other forms of output can give of the extent of achievement of curriculum aims - including those relating to personal transferable skills.
- *To assess the adequacy of feedback to students:* the external examiner does not normally see coursework, especially if it is for formative rather than summative assessment. Yet the return of coursework, with tutor's comments, is a crucial aspect of the learning process. Are these comments helpful, comprehensive, encouraging, perceptive and legible; or insulting, inadequate, inaccurate, incomprehensible, incomplete or indecipherable?

5.6 The End-of-Visit Meeting

During the course of the visit, it is likely that the team leader will hold brief meetings - perhaps at the end of each teaching day - so that assessors may compare notes and ensure that the team is covering all important issues on the agenda. The most crucial meeting, however, will come at the end of the visit, when assessors will try to reach a consensus on the quality of provision under each of the aspects of the framework.

At this meeting, it is important to remember that each assessor will have seen aspects of the provision which no other assessor will have seen. For example, the industrial assessor will have concentrated in particular on the extent to which the course fulfils its vocational aims, and develops general transferable skills; while the academic assessors will have specialised in different areas of teaching. Try not to judge provision on the basis of your individual perceptions alone. If your impressions have generally been of excellent standards, it is tempting to conclude that all provision is of this standard; other members of the team may, however, have uncovered flaws. At the same time it is important not to be too ready to defer to the perceptions of others, however eloquently and authoritatively expressed. Make sure your own evidence is given its full weight in the team's deliberations.

It is crucial that each aspect is considered in depth and that a consensus judgement is reached according to the four-point scale, both on individual aspects and on the overall summative grading. Although decisions reached at this stage may be considered provisional, it must be regarded as exceptional for any such decisions to be changed at a later stage.

6. Reporting

6.1 Reporting by Individual Assessors

Following the visit, you will have to write a report of your findings; this should take no more than two days, and you should send it back to SHEFC immediately after writing it and, at the very latest, within the week following the visit.

It is important to give full details of your activities during the visit and also to provide a thorough justification of the judgements made in the report itself. It will be for the collator to summarise and suppress the more personal or sensitive remarks made by individual assessors; do not engage in too much 'self-censorship' at this stage.

Remember that the team leader will have to return to the institution to discuss the findings of the draft report with members of staff, sometimes in the presence of senior management. It is vital, therefore, that the facts underlying the judgements in the final report are soundly based, and that their source can, if necessary, be confidently identified (subject, of course, to considerations of confidentiality). Your report should be based on hard fact, supported by evidence; impressions or hunches should be avoided at all costs. If you wish to make critical judgements, you must ensure that you have recorded enough well-based evidence to allow them to stand up in a court of law, if necessary. Keep your files of evidence until well after the reports have been published.

It is particularly important that you do not 'contaminate' your own report by including as 'facts' hearsay evidence which you have not observed for yourself, but have picked up from comments by another assessor. If you do wish to refer to another assessor's observations, make it clear that you are doing so. Otherwise, the collator may give more weight to such observations than they merit.

In writing the report as an individual assessor, please present your comments under the 11 aspects of the Quality Framework. When individual reports come to be collated, some of these headings will be combined.

In submitting your report, it is very important to meet the deadline. This is essential if the reporting cycle is to be completed within any reasonable time span. The programme of assessments in any one cognate area is very full; it would be all too easy to allow deadlines to slip. For this reason, it is better that individual assessors should pay relatively little attention to matters of style and presentation, and concentrate on getting a **comprehensive and factually accurate** report back to SHEFC as soon as possible after the event. The tidying-up can be done when the individual reports are collated. However, it must be emphasised that **the need for rapid response cannot be used as an excuse for inaccurate or misleading statements.**

6.2 Collating the Individual Reports

The task of collating the reports coming from individual assessors will normally fall to the team leader, who will prepare a summary draft report for SHEFC. This draft will form the basis of the feedback to institutions. Once comments from the institutions have been taken into account, the report will be edited for in-house style and sent to the Quality Assessment Committee.

If the schedule of visits is very crowded, the team leader may simply not have time to carry out reporting duties. To avoid a backlog developing, another member of the team will be asked to take over as collator.

Although there is a virtue in individual assessors using considerable freedom of expression in their own reports, the language of the summary report has to be much more circumspect. Institutions, the Quality Assessment Committee, SHEFC itself, and the media will all subject this report to close and sometimes hostile scrutiny. If you are preparing a summary report, choose each word with care.

Note also that you should write your report in the SHEFC house style. This may seem a trivial matter, but the task of final editing can be very time-consuming. 'Right first time' is a useful principle of quality assurance. The Quality Assessment Branch will supply you with notes on house style: please try to follow them.

SHEFC has decided that the final report itself is to be quite brief, probably not more than four A4 pages in length. However, you should elaborate on the report's contents in a private note to the head of the institution, giving 'further points for consideration'. Because this note is not for general circulation, you may write it in a less inhibited style than you would employ in the report itself, and may also include slightly more speculative material. As a very rough guide, this may be typically 6-8 pages in length.

The purpose of the 'further points' is to provide as much feedback as possible to the institution. In particular, they allow assessors to make recommendations based on a comparison of their own experience with that of the institution. Such comparisons may sometimes be very helpful; in making them, the assessment team is in effect offering 'consultancy' advice (though without charging commercial consultancy rates!) On the other hand, as with commercial consultancy, some of the suggestions made by 'outsiders' may not be appropriate in a specific institutional context; in such a case, the institution will no doubt ignore them, with no harm done. By contrast, the purpose of the report itself is to advise Council and to offer guidance to potential customers (students or employers) on the nature and quality of the provision on offer. Here a speculative comment which was not soundly based could be quite damaging. It is vital, therefore, that the published report be firmly grounded on the evidence collected by assessors.

How far should the report make reference to the self-assessment document? Assessors who are familiar with the approach of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) should note that Scottish practice is different. HEFCE requires assessors to found their reports firmly on the self-assessment document; to draw attention to differences between the claims made in these documents and the findings of the assessors, and point out gaps in coverage. By contrast, SHEFC takes the view that the self-assessments are confidential. They are certainly crucial to the assessment process, particularly in determining the initial agenda for the visit. If you are writing the final report you should make sure that you cover the issues raised in the self-assessment wherever possible. Nevertheless, you should not explicitly mention the claims made in the self-assessment, nor draw any contrasts with the findings of the team, in the published report itself.

However, it is acceptable and indeed desirable to draw such comparisons in the 'further points', since these are confidential to the institution. To this end, the differences between the institution's claim in the self-assessment and the judgement of the assessors should be explicitly addressed in these points for every aspect where such a difference arises, and explanations given for the discrepancies.

In a number of the assessments during the first round, the focus of the exercise shifted away from the issues arising from the self-assessment document to other matters less directly related to it. It is important that the self-assessment should not become a straitjacket, confining the freedom of the assessors to

pursue other matters which become more prominent as the visit progresses. This is likely to be more of a risk in the first few rounds of assessment, as departments seek to undertake self-assessments for the first time. Later, as institutions come to embrace a 'total quality management' approach more wholeheartedly and self-assessments become in consequence much more rigorous and comprehensive, it is to be expected that the problems identified by the departments will come to match much more closely those identified by the team.

The summary report should be presented under the following headings, which are an amalgamation of the 11 aspects of the Quality Framework:

Curriculum:

Include here any material relating to aspect A, 'aims and curricula', and aspect B, 'curriculum design and review'.

Environment and Resources:

This should cover aspects C, 'the teaching and learning environment'; D, 'staff resources'; and E, 'learning resources'.

Teaching and Assessment:

This includes aspects G, 'teaching and learning practice'; J, 'assessment and monitoring'; and the elements of F, 'course organisation', relating to coursework specification and scheduling.

Student Guidance and Support:

This covers aspect H, 'student support'.

Outcomes and Quality Control

This covers aspects K, 'student work', L, 'output, outcomes and quality control', and the remaining elements of F, on monitoring and feedback.

In addition, the report should be prefaced by an introductory section, which would briefly describe provision in the cognate area, the size and location of the department(s) responsible for the teaching, the size of the visiting team and the dates of the assessment visit. Finally, there should be a conclusions section summarising strengths and weaknesses of provision and giving the assessors' final 'summative' judgement in terms of the four-point scale. **In the draft report this concluding judgement should be omitted, since the institution is *not* to be given this information until it has been confirmed by Council.**

Please also note the following points of detail:

- *Reference to evidence:* given the sensitivity of the process, it is most important that the conclusions should follow naturally from what has gone before. Remember that no new evidence should appear in the conclusions section itself. You must make any critical comments,

together with their factual basis, quite explicit in the text of the first draft, to allow institutions the opportunity to correct any factual errors.

- *Reference to individuals:* although it is important to provide evidential back-up for your assertions, this evidence should stop short of naming individuals, or even of making criticisms which could be too easily attached to particular individuals. For example, rather than saying 'Teaching in first-year Groups A and B had been badly prepared' you should try to find some such phrase as 'Teaching preparation in some groups in first year failed to match the high standards observed elsewhere in the department'. Even if it is impossible to avoid making criticisms which would allow individual staff to be identified by their colleagues, stop short of identifying them by name. Remember that we are not attempting to assess the performance of individual teachers. It is a collective judgement of the overall process which we are seeking to obtain.

Finally, if you are acting as collator you should avoid the temptation to incorporate your own observations in the final report without making a separate record of them. It is important that at least a factual record of your individual findings should be lodged with SHEFC, in case any questions are subsequently asked about the source of comments in the final report. For collators, however, this record may legitimately involve a less detailed commentary than for other assessors.

7. The Role of the Industrial Assessor

The industrial assessor's role is to assess how well provision relates to broader social needs: these needs will often be industrial or commercial, as was frequently the case in the first two rounds of assessments, but the term 'industrial' may prove less apt in future rounds, particularly in the context of the humanities. Different cognate areas have different 'reference groups' - the local community, society at large, professional bodies, international institutions, the voluntary sector, public services. Whatever job title may be appropriate in these different cases, the job specification, at least in broad outline, remains much the same.

Some industrial assessors, if willing, may be able to be used in several different cognate areas. In many cognate areas within the broad fields of business, social science and the humanities, for example, courses are intended not so much to train students for subject-specific careers as to provide them with a background which will be useful in a very wide variety of employment opportunities. There is no reason in such cases why an industrial assessor should not be used on several occasions within the five-year cycle of assessments; indeed, the expertise thus acquired could be most valuable in permitting comparison of procedures and standards across cognate areas.

If you have been appointed as an industrial assessor, you will have a somewhat more limited role than do the academic assessors. You will normally be involved for only one full day of the visit, and you will therefore have a choice as to whether to attend the opening or closing meetings of the team. To some extent, the decision may be determined by your other commitments. On balance, however, it is probably better if you are able to attend the closing meeting, for two reasons. First, the issues which it is relevant for the industrial assessor to pursue often become more apparent during the course of the visit than they are at the beginning; so a later visit may be more productive than an earlier one. Secondly, it is useful to have the advice of an 'independent' assessor, with no institutional interest, when the final assessment category is being determined.

Industrial assessors do not involve themselves in the appraisal of teaching. This policy has been introduced out of respect to the sensitivities of the academic staff in the institutions, who may be reluctant to accept non-teachers coming into their classrooms to assess their teaching. Whether or not this policy is soundly based, it does have the advantage that it frees up the time of industrial assessors to focus on the particular areas of their expertise.

For detailed guidance on the issues to pursue, see QA/9, *Priorities for 'industrial' assessors*. When scrutinising the self-assessment, you should have these priorities particularly in mind; and on arriving at the institution for the visit, you should begin by comparing notes with the team leader, to ensure that you both agree on the agenda for your own part of the visit. This is likely to involve the following:

- *Discussion with the head of department:* this is important to allow you to get a statement of what the department claims to be doing in the way of external liaison.
- *Discussion with key staff:* this will allow judgement on the extent and quality of links with industry and commerce.
- *Discussion with the students:* this allows some kind of check on what the department is actually doing. Try if possible to speak to the final-year students, who are particularly concerned about the extent to which their qualification will make them attractive to employers. The team leader will seek to arrange the meeting with students at a time when you can attend, but this may not always be possible.
- *Assessment of any laboratory facilities:* this will give you an idea of how far the equipment or software used in teaching matches industry standards.

Your report will generally be briefer than those of the academic assessors, but you should write it and despatch it to SHEFC with the same sense of urgency.

8. The Role of the Lead Assessor

The lead assessor's core function is to take responsibility for the 'peer review' element of the process; it is essential, therefore, that lead assessors should be specialists in the cognate area. In practice, lead assessors may also involve themselves in assisting the SHEFC Directorate in a variety of ways, although the extent of this broader involvement will depend on the particular problems of the cognate area.

In the course of the assessment cycle, you may be expected, as lead assessor, to engage in the following:

- *Scrutiny of self-assessments:* this will be an essential part of any lead assessor's duties, and you should undertake it as soon as possible after the receipt of the documents at SHEFC, with a view to completing QA/7.
- *Recruitment of assessors and their allocation to teams:* this task will normally be shared between Directorate staff and the lead assessor. Institutions will send nominations to SHEFC, but these will at best provide only a pool of Scottish assessors. In addition, each team will normally include an academic assessor from furth of Scotland, as well as an assessor to represent non-academic interests. You will be invited to help SHEFC in the selection of such assessors. When making up individual teams, remember to ensure that the team has an appropriate balance in terms of institutional background and experience, specialist expertise and geographical location. Normally, a maximum of five assessors, including the leader, will be sent to an institution; each assessor should be used for at least three visits.
- *Selection of team leaders:* this will be necessary where there are large numbers of institutions to be visited, or where (as will often be the case) the lead assessor's own institution is to be visited.
- *Support for team leaders:* institutions are properly concerned that assessment teams should apply common standards to different institutions. It is very important, therefore, that lead assessors should retain responsibility for the entire assessment process in their cognate area, even where the task of leading the team has had to be delegated to someone else. This means that there is need for close contact between the lead assessor and the team leader (or, exceptionally, leaders) throughout the whole assessment period. In particular, the lead assessor should: (a) collaborate with the team leader on the preparation of the relevant QA/7 documents; (b) accompany the team leader on 'pre-visits' to institutions (or arrange for a member of the Directorate to do so); and (c) accompany the team leader (and, where relevant, the

collator) on the visit to discuss the first draft of the final report with the institution (or, again, arrange for a substitute from the Directorate).

- *Presenting the final reports:* when all the reports for a cognate area have been completed, they will be presented to the Quality Assessment Committee and then to the Council itself. You will be expected to attend to speak to the reports on both occasions; on the first but not the second of these, any other team leaders will also be invited. Note that even where you were not the team leader, you should be prepared to take ultimate responsibility for the reports.
- *Contributing to the Annual Report:* the Directorate is required to prepare a report on all the cognate areas which have been assessed in the course of a year. as lead assessor you will be expected to contribute an overview of provision in the area for which you have been responsible. The format of the annual report is given in QA/10.

9. Leading an Assessment Visit

All leaders of visiting teams, whether or not they are also lead assessors, have the following duties:

- *'Pre-visiting' institutions:* this visit has three main objectives. First, it allows you to confirm with the institution which documents require to be sent before the visit, and which are to be made available during the visit. Secondly, it affords the opportunity to discuss the 'logistical' arrangements: the location of the base room, the timing and composition of meetings with students and the *modus operandi* of the assessors. Assessors should take responsibility for their own provisions, and you should make it clear that the team does not wish to be offered hospitality. Thirdly, it allows you to establish the preliminary agenda for the visit by providing the institution with an indication of the principal matters arising from the QA/7 document; you should check the suitability of this agenda with the institution staff (usually the head of department and the author of the self-assessment, if different; sometimes institutions like to have a member of the senior management team or of the academic quality function present). Encourage the institution to put forward its own proposals for the agenda for the visit, for example by suggesting classes which might be of particular interest to assessors. Remember, however, that it is the assessment team, rather than the institution, which controls the agenda. For further details of what to do on the pre-visit, see QA/5.
- *Chairing the preliminary meeting of the team:* it is important at this meeting to ensure that each member of the team gets the opportunity to express an opinion on the intended agenda for the visit. A convenient way of doing this is to use QA/7 as a basis for the discussion, and to

invite each member in turn to propose additions or modifications. Try to discourage members from coming to an over-hasty conclusion on the basis of the self-assessment alone; it sometimes happens that departments with excellent provision write less-than-excellent documents, and the converse may also be found.

- *Organising the team's activities:* the institution will have left details of staff timetables in the base room (if it has not already sent them on in advance). At the preliminary meeting with the team you should ensure that members are allocated to attend particular classes or laboratories, as far as possible in accordance with their own expertise and preferences. In some cases it may have been possible to delegate tasks prior to the preliminary meeting. Emphasise to assessors the importance of speaking to the relevant teachers before visiting classes. It may be a good idea to break off the meeting at this point to allow them to make contact with as many of the teaching staff as they can find; alternatively, you may prefer to arrange an initial group meeting between assessors and staff as part of this preliminary afternoon's activities. If neither of these alternatives proves convenient, ask assessors to contact the relevant staff as soon as possible on the first day of the visit. You should also allocate responsibility for visits to library and other central facilities, or to non-teaching staff (careers advisers, for example) and for particular courses (if there are several) and, if necessary, years of courses.
- *Keeping things flexible:* it is useful if the base room has a blackboard or whiteboard on which you can display each assessor's programme. Impress upon assessors the importance of flexible response as new matters come to their attention; at the same time, encourage them to update the programme on the board whenever they get the chance, so that you can keep track of the progress of the visit, and make sure that the really essential parts of the programme are covered. A meeting at the end of each working day will also help to ensure this. It is also good practice to have a daily register of all staff from the institution pinned up in the base room, and for all planned meetings with individuals to be recorded on the list. This will help to avoid 'double booking' by assessors.
- *Targeting key people:* try to avoid upsetting people by making sure that everyone who feels entitled receives at least the offer of a courtesy visit. As far as possible, try to include the following: representatives of senior institutional management (take advice from the head of department on this); representatives of the quality assurance function; and members of staff who may not be teaching during the period of the visit, but who may still feel that they have something useful to contribute to your team's deliberations. If time does not permit a comprehensive coverage of staff, check with the head to ensure that you know who the key people are. **Remember that if you intend to**

make a criticism of some element of provision it is particularly important to ensure that the staff responsible get a chance to discuss this aspect. If the team wish to criticise the library, for example, make sure that there has been some discussion with a relevant member of the library staff during the visit.

- *Liaising with the head of department:* you should try to see the head of department when you first arrive for the visit, if only for reasons of courtesy; and as soon as possible after the preliminary meeting of assessors, to give details of the provisional timetable and of any changes in the agenda which result from this meeting. Make it clear, of course, that both the timetable and the revised agenda may be subject to further revision as the visit progresses, and that you may not be able to give advance notice of all the details of the changes. You should also see the head at the end of the visit, to convey the team's thanks for co-operation received; it should have been made clear well in advance of the visit that no details will be revealed of the team's conclusions at this stage. Both at the first and at the last meeting, staff from senior management may wish to be involved. Try to clarify this in advance through the head of department.
- *Chairing the final meeting:* this will normally be held after you have taken your leave of the head of department. Again, it is important to ensure that each member of the team is encouraged to make a full contribution to the proceedings. A good way to do this is to ask team members to write down on one side of A4, immediately before the meeting, their judgement of the standard of provision under each of the 11 aspects, **without consulting with other members**. They should hand this to you at the start of the meeting. For each aspect, you should then ask them to justify the judgement expressed, forcing them all the time to give an account of the evidence on which their view is based. Only after they have done this should you try to work towards consensus on whether the judgement for that aspect is 'Excellent', 'Highly Satisfactory', 'Satisfactory' or 'Unsatisfactory'. Note those aspects on which no consensus has been achieved. Respect divergent opinions, as long as these have been clearly stated and supported by coherent argument. In the last resort, it will be necessary to take a majority view on the summative assessment if no consensus can be found; there is no provision for 'minority reports'. In practice, however, a consensus view usually does emerge during the visit and the final meeting.
- *Making sure that all team members complete a QA/12:* it is very important that all team members maintain a proper record of the evidence base on which their conclusions depend. To ensure that this record is accurate, ask them to complete it and to give it to you before they leave the institution.

- *Visiting the institution to discuss the draft report:* after the draft report has been prepared, and approved by all team members, the Directorate will send a copy to the institution a few days before you are due to meet the institutional representatives. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss possible inaccuracies of fact. Take with you another representative of the team, or a member of the Directorate. If the team leader is not also the lead assessor then both should ideally attend, except where the lead assessor's own institution is concerned. The author of the final report, where this function has been delegated, should also attend for the visit. It is essential to have a colleague present on these occasions in case there should be subsequent argument about changes agreed in the document. At the meeting, comments from the institution's staff are bound to drift from questions of fact to questions of interpretation. Do not allow yourself to be pushed into promising changes of this sort: simply offer to give the issues further consideration. Make it clear to the institutions that this will be the only opportunity which they will have to provide feedback on any aspect of the report's findings. After the meeting, prepare a note for file of the main issues discussed.
- *Confirming the report for transmission to the Quality Assessment Committee:* it should normally be possible, and it is certainly desirable, to reach a final view on the summative assessment at the final meeting with assessors which will be sufficiently well-founded to withstand any changes to the draft proposed by the institution. Exceptionally, however, the team leader may wish to ask the team to review a decision in the light of subsequent information. If possible, this should be done by post or telephone; as a last resort, it may require a specially-convened meeting.

10. Confidentiality

At all stages prior to publication of the reports, assessors must preserve the confidentiality of the proceedings. Even after the publication of the report, they should reveal no more details than are contained in the published record.

11. Conclusion

The process of assessment is an evolving one. Once you have had experience of being an assessor, you will no doubt be able to think of ways in which the process may be improved. Please send all such comments to us at the following address:

Quality Assessment Branch
Teaching and Learning Directorate
Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
97 Haymarket Terrace
EDINBURGH
EH12 5HD
Tel: 031-313 6500
Fax: 031-313 6501

Useful telephone no's:

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Title</u> | <u>Direct no.</u> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Mr Jim Donaldson | Director of Teaching and Learning | 031-313 6509 |
| Professor Alistair Young | Head of Quality Assessment | 031-313 6512 |
| Professor Gareth Owen | Senior Principal | 031-313 6513 |
| Mr David Russell | Senior Principal | 031-313 6511 |
| Ms Mary Boyle | Administrative Coordinator | 031-313 6515 |
| Ms Maureen Masson | Project Development Officer | 031-313 6517 |



**Scottish Higher Education
Funding Council**

**QUALITY ASSESSMENT
1994-95**

The SHEFC Approach

Background

1. The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 and the Higher Education White Paper (Cm 1541) distinguish between Quality Control, Quality Audit and Quality Assessment. Definitions of the various terms as used in the Act and the White Paper are set out in Annex A. The Annex also includes definitions of terms as used in this paper. Responsibility for Quality Control will reside with the higher education institutions themselves and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) will have responsibility for Quality Audit. The HEQC, which is controlled by higher education institutions, provides an element of external scrutiny comparable with that which has been provided in the polytechnic and college sector by the Council for National Academic Awards and, more recently in the university sector, by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals' Academic Audit Unit. Quality Audit concerns itself chiefly with an institution's systems and processes rather than with individual course/subject processes and outcomes.

The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) has responsibility for Quality Assessment.

2. The Government regards Quality Assessment as a central part of its higher education reforms. The Funding Council is obliged by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 and the Letter of Guidance from the Secretary of State to undertake assessments and to have regard to the outcome of such assessments when determining funding for institutions. The general purposes of Quality Assessment may be summarised as:
 - to provide a basis for advice to Council on the quality of educational provision in higher education institutions funded by SHEFC;
 - to produce reports which identify strengths and weaknesses, promote good practice and stimulate improvement;
 - to monitor trends in the quality of provision relative to resources and the implementation of recommendations in earlier reports; and encourage progressive improvement by a programme of re-visiting;
 - to provide a basis for advice to Council on the promotion and maintenance of quality through innovations and developments in curriculum, teaching and assessment;
 - to inform students and employers on the quality of provision, thereby promoting competition and choice.

3. 'Quality' does not lend itself to easy or precise definition. There is general agreement, however, that in this context the quality of any activity may only be assessed in relation to the purpose of that activity. It is for that reason that the Council's Quality Assessment will be conducted always in the context of an institution's own declared aims, purposes and mission. At the level of a specialist subject-area, faculty, departmental and course aims will be relevant (and are mentioned in the Framework below) but these should be consistent with, indeed contribute to the pursuit of, institutional aims.
4. Many would argue that quality is best assessed by direct comparison of results with intentions. However, this is difficult in practice. Results which are measured by, for example, graduate output and post-course destinations do not of themselves provide a basis for definitive assessments of quality and they are in any case available only after a considerable time has elapsed. Also, outcomes of higher education such as values and scholarship do not lend themselves to precise assessment. The attached Quality Framework, recognising these difficulties, includes evaluation of inputs and processes as well as of outputs and outcomes. The detail of its design takes account of many comments received from institutions, including responses to Council's consultation paper.

Assessment Method

5. The approach to Quality Assessment being adopted by SHEFC is the result of considerable consultation and trialing. Following preliminary exchanges of views and a pilot programme of Quality Assessment between January and March 1992, a Consultation Paper was issued by Council in August 1992 containing proposals based on the earlier discussions and the evaluation of the pilot programme. The method described below is the outcome of that consultation exercise and is characterised by several key features.
6. The process is founded on 'self-assessment' by institutions. This approach recognises both the diversity of missions and approaches to quality assurance in institutions and also the wealth of expertise built up through experience of AAU, CNAAs and internal approaches. The self-assessment process is described in more detail in separate Guidance Notes.
7. Both the self-assessment process and the subsequent external assessment process will use the SHEFC Quality Framework (q.v.) as an operational definition of what is meant by 'the quality of provision of education'. As mentioned earlier, this framework is a blend of outputs, processes and inputs. It will be progressively refined and adapted from year to year for use in varying contexts. While the eleven 'aspects' represent the major dimensions of quality of educational provision as defined by Council, it is not intended that every element be slavishly assessed and applied in all contexts.

8. The external Quality Assessment will be carried out by practitioners in that subject-area, seconded from higher education institutions throughout the UK, and by assessors drawn from industry and commerce. The assessors will be supported by Council's Quality Assessment Directorate, all of whom have a background of teaching in higher education.
9. Assessment will be conducted on the basis of 'cognate areas', that is distinct homogeneous subject-areas such as Economics, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Chemistry, History etc. The precise number and boundaries of cognate areas within each of the subject-groups set out in the five year programme for Quality Assessment will be communicated to institutions in December each year. Requests for self-assessments will be issued at the same time.
10. All institutions with named awards and a substantial level of provision in a particular cognate area will be included in the self-assessment stage of the process, but only a representative sample of provision - arrived at by consultation between assessors and the institution - will be assessed. Where a substantial part of provision in the cognate area takes the form of 'service' provision to other courses, this will normally be assessed by the team of assessors in the 'home' cognate area, rather than as part of these other courses; it should therefore be covered in the self-assessment for that cognate area. For example, business units supplied to engineering degree programmes should be assessed under 'business and management' rather than under the engineering cognate area. Again, however, it would not be intended to cover more than a representative sample of such service teaching.
11. In 1994-95, assessments will be made against a 4-point scale, namely '*Excellent*', '*Highly Satisfactory*', '*Satisfactory*' or '*Unsatisfactory*'. To assist institutions to arrive at an overall assessment, broad operational definitions of '*Excellent*', '*Highly Satisfactory*', '*Satisfactory*', and '*Unsatisfactory*' are set out in Annex B.

The Assessment Process

12. Each year, a number of cognate areas will be identified by Council for assessment. Institutions will be advised of the cognate areas to be assessed in December to allow them to carry out self-assessments by the end of June. These self-assessments will be scrutinised by specialist Lead Assessors drawn from higher education institutions and co-ordinated by Council's Quality Assessment Branch.
13. All departments to be assessed will receive a 'pre-visit'. The primary purposes of the pre-visit are to confirm the dates of the main assessment visit, settle the

sample of provision to be assessed and make arrangements for collection and submission of students' work. Arrangements would also be confirmed for submission of necessary documentation as specified in QA/4.

14. The main assessment visit would normally occupy 3 days within one working week, during which the team of assessors - 3 to 5 assessors, depending on the scale of provision - would meet students and staff, view facilities and observe teaching and learning. Additional documentary information submitted to SHEFC would have been studied before the visit.
15. At the end of the visit, subject assessors will meet with representatives of the institutions in order to provide an opportunity, if necessary, to ensure that assessors have the complete evidence base on which the assessment will be founded. At this stage it would not be appropriate to convey any overall judgement on the strengths and weaknesses of the provision on offer.

Following the visit, subject assessors will prepare a draft written report which will be discussed with senior management in the institution. The purpose of the discussion is to provide a final check on matters of factual accuracy and to give feedback on the findings of the assessment team. As before, feedback will stop short of an overall summative assessment. The Quality Assessment Committee will receive and consider reports on institutional assessments carried out on behalf of Council, and will make recommendations to Council on the publication of reports. Published reports will summarise the main assessment findings and will be made available not only to the institution but also more generally.

The Quality Framework

16. The Quality Framework (Paper QA/2) was generally accepted by respondents to Council's consultation paper as a fair description of quality for the purposes of Quality Assessment. Most of the content is self-explanatory but a few aspects and elements deserve comment.
17. The assessment of provision is set in the context of the institution's mission and aims, as reflected in department or faculty aims and, more specifically, course aims and objectives. Curriculum and course design should reflect and serve these aims.
18. The Teaching and Learning Environment, Staff Resources and Learning Resources are essentially 'inputs' to the teaching and learning process, but contribute to the overall Quality Assessment as proxies for more direct assessment of the processes themselves or their outcomes, where such direct assessment is not possible.

19. Course Organisation, Teaching and Learning Practice, Student Support and Assessment and Monitoring may all be viewed as aspects of the 'delivery' process but are separated for ease of understanding. 'Student Work' is the most visible and immediate evidence of outcomes of the learning process and is of interest to quality assessors not as an indication of the academic standards prevailing in the subject, which is properly a matter for external examiners, but as an indication of the quality of the teaching, learning and assessment processes. Other outcomes should be reflected in appropriate performance indicators. In the present state of development of performance indicators, it is not considered appropriate to use them for cross-institutional comparisons; however, they may be used to monitor trends over time within an institution, and it is with this latter use that the assessment process will be concerned.
20. In looking at 'Quality Control', assessors will be less interested in the adequacy of institutional quality systems and processes, which is the chief concern of the Division of Quality Audit of the Higher Education Quality Council, than in how well such arrangements, and more local quality assurance provision, actually work in the cognate area being assessed.

Conclusion

21. The process of Quality Assessment will continue to evolve over the next few years. The respective roles of institutions, assessors and SHEFC staff will continue to develop and all concerned will learn from experience. Possibilities of collaboration and harmonisation among SHEFC, HEQC, accrediting bodies and institutions themselves will be explored further and the approach outlined in this paper will be adapted to reflect such developments. Ultimately, quality assurance and enhancement should be a co-operative exercise by all concerned: SHEFC looks forward to playing an active part in that enterprise.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

'Glossary'

Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance encompasses all the policies, systems and processes directed to ensuring maintenance and enhancement of the quality of educational provision in higher education.

Quality Control

Quality Control relates to the arrangements (procedures, standards, organisation) within HE institutions which verify that teaching and assessment are carried out in a satisfactory manner. Quality control would include the external examiner system and is usually *post hoc* and the responsibility of the institution itself.

Quality Audit

Quality audit is the process of ensuring that the quality control arrangements in an institution are satisfactory and effective. In practice, prime responsibility for quality audit lies individually or collectively with institutions, and it extends to most aspects of quality assurance in an institution including staff development and curriculum design. External quality audit will be conducted by the Division of Quality Audit of the Higher Education Quality Council which is collectively owned and funded by the institutions.

Quality Assessment

Quality Assessment is the process of external evaluation of the actual provision of education. It is a statutory responsibility of the Funding Councils. The process of external assessment by peers of actual provision in particular subjects is by scrutiny of institutional documentation and student work; direct observation; interview; and by reference to performance indicators such as completion rates.

Subject Groups

The cost of teaching varies from subject to subject and, for purposes of funding, subjects are classified into subject groups.

Cognate Area

An area of provision, typically narrower than a subject group and characterised by the relative homogeneity of the subject areas included. In some cases a cognate area might comprise a single subject or discipline (Philosophy, perhaps), in others several closely related subjects (Mathematics and Statistics). The delineation of cognate areas is not always self-evident and will have to be developed with assistance from institutions.

Quality Assessment Scale

- Excellent*** : The quality of provision is satisfactory in all aspects of the Quality Framework and outstanding in most.
- Highly Satisfactory*** : The quality of provision is satisfactory in all aspects of the Quality Framework and has areas of particular strength.
- Satisfactory*** : The quality of provision is satisfactory in most aspects of the Quality Framework and, overall, strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- Unsatisfactory*** : The quality of provision is unsatisfactory in several aspects of the Quality Framework and, overall, weaknesses outweigh strengths.



Scottish Higher Education
Funding Council

Quality Framework 1994-95

This framework was adopted by Council on 8 October 1992 as the definition of quality of provision against which quality assessment should be conducted. It reflects comments received in response to Council's Consultation Paper on 'Assessment of Quality of Provision of Education in Higher Education Institutions' (August 1992). It has been subject to minor revisions as a consequence of the experience of the first two rounds of assessment.

Institutions and assessors alike are reminded that the framework is intended only as a prompt or *aide memoire*, which has deliberately been designed to encompass as wide a range of institutional missions as possible. It is very likely, therefore, that some of the elements listed will be irrelevant to particular cognate areas in individual institutions. It is not intended that every element be applied in all contexts.

A s p e c t s

- A. Aims and Curricula
- B. Curriculum Design and Review
- C. The Teaching and Learning Environment
- D. Staff Resources
- E. Learning Resources
- F. Course Organisation
- G. Teaching and Learning Practice
- H. Student Support
- J. Assessment and Monitoring
- K. Students' Work
- L. Output, Outcomes and Quality Control

A. Aims and Curricula

- A.1 Curriculum aims and objectives are explicit and known to staff and students.
- A.2 Specialist aims and objectives are consistent with institutional mission and aims.
- A.3 Aims and objectives correspond to the needs of students, society and the economy, as revealed by systematic investigation.
- A.4 Curricula accurately reflect declared aims and objectives and the needs identified.
- A.5 Curricula provide an appropriate balance of specialist content, general conceptual skills and personal, transferable skills.
- A.6 Curricula are up-to-date in terms of specialist developments.

B. Curriculum Design and Review

[By 'course' is meant any coherent learning programme which may be evaluated in its own right.]

- B.1 Courses are imaginatively designed to meet as effectively as possible the needs of the full range of intended students, in terms of course length/duration, modes of attendance, location, structure and sequence, optional elements etc.
- B.2 Appropriate provision is made for alternative curricular modes such as accreditation of prior learning (APL), credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), work-based learning (WBL), open learning (OL), distance learning (DL) etc.
- B.3 Course design seeks to maximise access for: students with special needs, disadvantaged groups, applicants with non-standard qualifications, mature entrants etc.
- B.4 Courses are periodically reviewed to assess their suitability and adjustments made within a reasonable timescale.
- B.5 There is regular liaison between the institution and industry, commerce, public agencies, professional bodies and other potential end-users.

C. The Teaching and Learning Environment

- C.1 The academic environment, physical and social, is generally conducive to learning, and the level of research and other scholarly activities is appropriate to the level of teaching.
- C.2 Teaching accommodation is sufficient in quantity and appropriate for the curriculum on offer and for the full range of students.
- C.3 There are adequate specialist facilities - including practical and experiential learning facilities - for the curriculum on offer.
- C.4 There are adequate facilities for meeting the needs of students with special needs, including those who are physically disadvantaged.
- C.5 Ancillary facilities - staff accommodation, storage space, preparation rooms, amenity accommodation etc. - are adequate.
- C.6 The physical environment is well maintained in terms of decor, cleanliness, repairs, safety and necessary modifications.
- C.7 Accommodation, especially specialist accommodation, is effectively deployed and imaginatively used: as evidenced by suitable plans, schedules, timetables and control systems.

D. Staff Resources

- D.1 The teaching staff establishment is sufficient to deliver the curriculum.
- D.2 The teaching staff complement is suitable for the curriculum, in terms of the mix of qualifications, experience, aptitudes, age, status etc.
- D.3 There is adequate support in terms of library, technician, administrative, student services etc. staffing.
- D.4 Staff resources are effectively deployed: roles and relationships are well defined and understood; duties allocated appropriate to qualifications, experience and aptitude; there is provision for review, consultation and redeployment.
- D.5 Staff development needs are systematically identified, in relation to individual aspirations, the curriculum and institutional requirements.
- D.6 All staff, academic and support, regularly undertake appropriate staff development related to identified needs: induction, in-service training, secondments, consultancy, research and other scholarly activities.

E. Learning Resources

- E.1 There are sufficient physical resources to deliver the curriculum, including equipment, materials and information technology.
- E.2 Equipment is up-to-date, readily available and effectively deployed.
- E.3 Library, audio-visual, computer and other academic services are adequate for the curriculum.

F. Course Organisation

- F.1 Learning programmes ('courses') are effectively organised and managed.
- F.2 Teaching programmes are clearly articulated, made known to students and regularly monitored.
- F.3 Course work and assessment are systematically scheduled and co-ordinated among lecturers and specialisms.
- F.4 Feedback is regularly obtained from students, employers, moderators and auditors, and analysed and acted upon as appropriate.

G. Teaching and Learning Practice

- G.1 Teaching and learning are based on explicit objectives which are consistent with course aims.
- G.2 Teaching methods are varied and innovative where this would be appropriate in pursuit of stated objectives, and make effective use of available facilities, equipment, materials and aids.
- G.3 Teaching is well planned and prepared.
- G.4 Teaching is effectively performed, taking account of the needs of all categories of student, including, where necessary, the physically disadvantaged student.
- G.5 The pace of teaching and learning takes due account of the nature of the curriculum, students' varied abilities and prior learning, and the specific needs of the very able and weak students.

- G.6 Teaching approaches encourage independent learning and students take responsibility for their own learning.
- G.7 Learning is enriched by appropriate reference to cross-curricular links, current research, industrial applications and development of generic skills such as communication and teamwork.
- G.8 Staff give evidence of concern to ensure that the total learning experience encourages 'deep' rather than 'surface' learning by students.

H. Student Support

- H.1 The need of all students for guidance and support is recognised and provision made for advice and assistance in the curricular, vocational and personal domains.
- H.2 Responsibility for particular aspects of student support is clearly located and effective liaison maintained between arrangements at course/department level and institution-wide services.
- H.3 Adequate provision is made for information and advice to potential students during the application and enrolment phases.
- H.4 Adequate provision is made for support for students who are physically disadvantaged or who have learning difficulties.
- H.5 Students are effectively supported during their studies by systems of induction, course tutors, personal tutors and provision for remediation and curricular choice.
- H.6 Students are prepared for the next stage of study or employment by appropriate contacts, information, advice and training.
- H.7 Among individual staff there is a general attitude of concern for the well-being of students.

J. Assessment and Monitoring

- J.1 Assessment arrangements correspond to all the aims and aspects of the curriculum as taught.
- J.2 A range of assessment methods is used in a planned manner to serve diagnostic, formative and summative purposes.

- J.3 The scope and weighting of assessment schemes are clear and known to all concerned.
- J.4 Standards applied in assessment schemes are explicit and consistent across the curriculum
- J.5 Procedures are regularly applied to ensure that, as far as possible, assessment schemes are valid, reliable and fairly administered.
- J.6 Student progress is systematically recorded and monitored, fed back to students and corrective action taken where necessary.
- J.7 Students have ready access to reasonable appeal procedures.

K. Students' Work

- K.1 Course work is regularly set and assessed and is at the appropriate level of attainment.
- K.2 Course work faithfully reflects the full range of curricular aims, including the development of generic skills.
- K.3 Students' performance and attitudes indicate a positive and successful learning experience.
- K.4 Students' work gives evidence of in-depth rather than merely superficial learning.

L. Output, Outcomes And Quality Control

- L.1 Performance Indicators are regularly used to inform institutional assessment of achievement in relation to educational aims and objectives.
- L.2 Results are monitored and analysed and appropriate action taken.
- L.3 Results against these or other appropriate indicators compare favourably with institutional norms.
- L.4 QC arrangements at institutional, department, subject and/or course level are consistent and coherent.
- L.5 Quality standards, policies and strategies, are consistently applied and periodically reviewed within the cognate area.
- L.6 There is a general commitment to excellence in teaching and learning, apparent in staff and student attitudes in all aspects of provision.



**Scottish Higher Education
Funding Council**

Quality Assessment Programme 1994-95

Assessment of Quality of Provision in:

Art, Design and Performing Arts:

Design (Textiles and Graphics)

Fine Art (Printmaking, Sculpture and Painting)

Music

Education:

Teacher Training Provision

Built Environment:

Architecture

Building and Surveying (Building, Building Surveying, Quantity Surveying)

Catering and Hospitality Management:

Consumer Studies

Hospitality

Business and Administrative Studies:

Business and Management

Guidance Notes on Institutional Self-Assessment

1. The introduction of a system of Quality Assessment based on evidence arising from institutional self-assessment exercises at subject level is consistent with that found in industry and reflects total quality management practice. Institutions devote considerable resources to the development of effective quality control arrangements, and the Council's approach will build on these by taking account of the findings of internal self-assessment measures in operation at subject level. External quality assessment ensures that internal procedures are scrutinised independently.
2. The Quality Framework represents the Council's view of the main aspects of quality against which institutions will be assessed at subject level. Self-assessment at subject level should, as far as possible, be based on the aspect headings contained within the Quality Framework. For ease of reference these are summarised in paragraph 3. Such an approach should result in submissions being forwarded to SHEFC in a consistent format, making for ease of

analysis. The self-assessment document should be a succinct but comprehensive statement of the overall quality of teaching and learning in the subject under assessment. Submissions should contain evaluative comment on the quality of provision on offer, with supporting or explanatory detail to be found in annexes. Such an approach should result in submissions considerably shorter than would otherwise be the case. In essence, the document should be a critical commentary on the overall provision of the subject under assessment. At the end of each aspect, institutions should give a summative judgement of the quality of provision for that aspect, using the four categories explained in QA/1 - Annex B; this judgement should be related to the preceding analysis.

3. Council does not wish to prescribe the style of submission but the scope and coverage within each aspect of the framework should include comments on some or all of the following:

- 3.1 **Introduction**

The institution and its mission; institutional organisation. The place of the cognate area in the institution.

- 3.2 **Aims and Curricula**

Institutional, faculty, departmental and course aims; student awareness of aims; market analysis and strategy; review of aims.

- 3.3 **Curriculum Design And Review**

Approaches to curriculum design and review; criteria and responsibilities.

- 3.4 **Teaching and Learning Environment**

The physical environment (accommodation and facilities) and its effect on teaching and learning; the social and intellectual environment.

- 3.5 **Staff Resources**

The overall current situation, quantitative and qualitative; the matching of staff expertise to the curriculum; the development of staff; effectiveness of staff contribution to teaching.

- 3.6 **Learning Resources**

The range and appropriateness of learning resources within the section/programme.

3.7 Course Organisation

How the curriculum is organised - courses, programmes, subjects etc; who is responsible for what and how that responsibility is acquitted.

3.8 Teaching and Learning Practice

The approaches to teaching; institutional, faculty or departmental influences on pedagogy; distinctive characteristics of teaching and learning in **this** subject; evaluation of effectiveness of teaching and learning.

3.9 Student Support

Effectiveness of student support mechanisms at course, departmental and institutional level.

3.10 Assessment and Monitoring

The approaches to assessment; policies at institutional, faculty and departmental levels; the matching of assessments with the aims of the curriculum; effectiveness of feedback to students.

3.11 Student Work

The range of student work: written/practical, formal/informal, individual/group, institution/work-based. Evidence of student achievement; criteria for measurement of achievement.

3.12 Output, Outcomes and Quality Control

Apart from student work, what measures of performance are used? Give results indicating any significant trends for the subject. In the context of **institutional** quality assurance arrangements, what provision is made at department/course/subject level and how well does it match institutional provision? Is it effective? State any weaknesses which have been identified and any action proposed.

3.13 Conclusion, Commentary and Assessment

The overall picture, summarising both strengths and weaknesses. Overall summative assessment on a 4-point scale with qualifications and/or comments.

3.14 Appendices

Whatever additional detail is deemed to be appropriate to support the evaluation. It is not necessary to **prove** statements in the self-assessment, only to illustrate and expand. Facts and assessments will be verified by the quality assessors during their visit.

4. A specification of the information which quality assessors will require during assessment visits is detailed in QA/4. Most of this information will be readily available in institutions. Institutions may decide to submit supporting information with the self-assessment document, but it is hoped that such documentation will be kept to a minimum. One of the purposes of the visits to institutions by quality assessors is to examine the documentary and other evidence on which the self-assessment at subject level is based.

December 1993



Scottish Higher Education Funding Council

Information and Documentation Required for Quality Assessments in Session 1994-95

- 1. To be submitted with self-assessment documentation
(6 complete sets)**
 - 1.1 List of courses constituting provision in this cognate area with enrolments for the past two years.
 - 1.2 Existing course and other relevant departmental documentation.
 - 1.3 External examiner reports for the past two years.
 - 1.4 Internal course/programme monitoring/evaluation reports for the past two years, where available.
 - 1.5 Any relevant external validation/accreditation reports.
 - 1.6 Statements of institutional mission, departmental and/or faculty aims.
 - 1.7 Comprehensive staff lists.
 - 1.8 Departmental organisation and staff responsibilities.
 - 1.9 Specialist accommodation and facilities.
 - 1.10 Student services at both institutional and departmental level.
 - 1.11 Student intake, progression and graduation data for the past two years.
 - 1.12 First destinations of graduates for the past two years.
 - 1.13 Performance Indicator (PI) data.
 - 1.14 Current quality-related policy statements (departmental and institutional).

- 2. To be submitted to the team leader during the pre-visit
(1 set)**
 - 2.1 Student timetables for the period of the visit.
 - 2.2 Staff availability during the visit.

3. To be made available during the visit (1 set)

- 3.1 Accommodation layout plans
- 3.2 Support staff details.
- 3.3 Student feedback data.
- 3.4 Details of assessment arrangements.
- 3.5 Sample of marked student work (including examples of staff feedback to students).

December 1993.

Notes for Guidance on Information and Documentation Required for Quality Assessments in Session 1994-95

The following notes give further explanations and guidance on what is expected from higher education institutions in their submission of information and documentation. It should be emphasised that SHEFC does not expect the generation of new documentation, other than for the self-assessment itself. HEIs are encouraged to submit data and information from existing sources.

1. To be submitted with self-assessment documentation

[Although only six copies of this material are asked for in the first instance, it may become necessary later to request one or two more depending on the size of the assessment team.]

1.1 List of courses constituting provision in this cognate area with enrolments for the past two years

Lists of all undergraduate and taught post-graduate courses/programmes in the area being assessed, together with enrolments for the past two years. Only taught post-graduate courses which are grant-aided need be included.

1.2 Existing course documentation

Existing documentation such as course descriptions, course leaflets, syllabuses and calendar entries or any similar information given to students. It is not intended that institutions should generate new documentation for this exercise.

1.3 External examiner reports for the past two years

External examiner reports, together with correspondence relating to any subsequent action. If there are exceptional problems of sensitivity or confidentiality, the reports should be available for scrutiny during the visit.

1.4 Internal course/programme monitoring/evaluation reports for the past two years

Where any internal reviews or evaluations have taken place, the resulting reports should be submitted.

1.5 Any relevant external validations/accreditation reports

This would include reports by engineering or other professional bodies and reports by the HEQC. While these provide very useful background for the assessment exercise, it is understood that considerations of confidentiality may on occasion prevent their release to assessors.

1.6 Statements of institutional mission, departmental and/or faculty aims.

Existing statements of mission or aims, whether free-standing or incorporated in institutional plans, etc.

1.7 Comprehensive staff lists

A list of all staff who teach in the subject under assessment including an indication of their responsibilities and specialist interests, together with the amount of teaching they do (either hours/week or hours/year, as convenient).

1.8 Departmental organisation and staff responsibilities

An outline of the management structure of the section/department. It may be convenient to combine this item with 1.7.

1.9 Specialist accommodation and facilities

Brief description of all specialist accommodation and facilities, such as laboratories, used for teaching purposes. Where such facilities are shared with research activities, this should be noted.

1.10 Student services at both institutional and departmental level

Description of library services and of services for student guidance and welfare, including careers services, and of the integration of all such services at local departmental level to meet the needs of individual students in particular cognate areas. Recent annual reports for such services, or copies of relevant sections of strategic or annual plans, may be sent to provide background for assessors.

1.11 Student intake, progression and graduation data for the past two years

Enrolment data for each year of the main courses or programmes offered. Where there is a distinct course progression from one year to the next, a progression analysis should be provided for the last two cohorts. Details of graduations, including class of degrees, should be provided for the past two years.

1.12 First destinations of graduates for the past two years

As prepared for USR/FES purposes, but for this cognate area only.

1.13 Performance Indicator (PI) data

An indication of any PIs used by the section or department should be given and how they are used as a management tool. Any reports relating to the monitoring and analysis of PIs, including any subsequent action taken, should be included.

1.14 Current quality-related policy statements (departmental and institutional)

Any current policy statements relevant to quality of provision, e.g. on Quality Assurance/Control, Staff Development, Performance Review, Course Evaluation, Assessment etc.

2. Documentation to be submitted to the team leader during the previsit

[Note that the previsit may also give the opportunity to update any of the information provided at stage 1]

2.1 Student timetables for the period of the visit

Timetables should be provided for all classes/courses/programmes included within the agreed sample.

2.2 Staff availability during the visit

Details of staff availability and teaching commitments for the duration of the visit, including staff room numbers and telephone extensions.

3. Documentation to be made available at the time of main visit by quality assessors

3.1 Accommodation layout plans

Simple plans or directions to enable assessors to locate easily all teaching and staff accommodation.

3.2 Support staff details

The number of support staff (technician and clerical) supporting the subject under assessment with an indication of their particular role or specialism. Distinction should be made between support staff funded from research funds and those from recurrent grant.

3.3 Student feedback data

Arrangements for liaison between staff and students relating to the subject under assessment. Where student questionnaires or other forms of course evaluation have been used, these should be made available with results. Minutes of staff/student liaison committees could also be provided if available.

3.4 Details of assessment arrangements

Description of the range of assessment activities, including the coursework and assessment schedules given to students.

3.5 Sample of marked student work

A range of marked student work including examination scripts, project reports, laboratory reports and other assignments will be requested. The selection of the sample will be the responsibility of the specialist assessor in consultation with appropriate staff.

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Introduction

Background

- 1 The mission of the Agency is to promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced. To this end, the Agency carries out academic reviews of the performance of subjects and institutions. This *Handbook* describes the method and procedures for carrying out academic reviews, in respect of both programmes (single subject or inter-disciplinary) and institutions, the quality of learning opportunities provided, the academic standards achieved, and the quality assurance systems operating in higher education (HE) institutions in the UK.
- 2 The method and procedures comprise an integrated approach focused on the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of academic standards. These are matters for which the primary responsibility lies with the HE institution. However, the funding councils have a statutory responsibility to secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education they fund. The Agency acts on behalf of the funding bodies in this respect.
- 3 The main purposes of this statutory assessment are:
 - to secure value from public investment, by ensuring that all education for which funding is provided is of approved quality, and by encouraging speedy rectification of major shortcomings in the quality of education, and to enable judgements to inform funding should the funding council so decide;
 - to encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of subject review reports and subject overview reports, and through the sharing of best practice;
 - to provide, through the publication of reports, effective and accessible public information on the quality of HE.
- 4 Public confidence in the quality and standards of higher education depends on the availability of public information that is objective and independent. The Agency provides this by addressing three inter-dependent areas:
 - reporting on **programme outcome standards** is concerned with the appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes set by the subject provider (in relation to relevant subject benchmark statements, qualification levels and the overall aims of the provision), the effectiveness of curricular content and assessment arrangements (in relation to the intended learning outcomes), and the achievements of students;
 - reporting on the **quality of learning opportunities** in a subject is concerned with the effectiveness of the teaching, the learning resources and the academic support in promoting student learning and achievement across the various programmes in the subject area;
 - reporting on **institutional management of standards and quality** is concerned with the robustness and security of institutional systems relating to the awarding function. This involves, in particular, arrangements for dealing with approval and review of programmes, the management of institutional credit and qualification arrangements, and the management of assessment procedures.
- 5 The overall process of gathering evidence about standards and quality must be effective and efficient and avoid, as far as possible, duplication of effort. Reports on programme outcome standards and the quality of learning opportunities will be outputs of a single process of review of subjects, which forms the focus of **Part 1** of this *Handbook*. These reports feed information into the process of scrutiny of institutions, thereby providing material for reports on institutional management of standards and quality. This process is dealt with in **Part 2** of this *Handbook*.

- 6 Conceptually, academic review may be seen as a dynamic engagement with the internal processes of an institution over a six-year cycle. Subject review will update continuously the picture that the Agency has of an institution, and will provide audit trails to inform judgements about overall institutional systems. For review of institutional systems, it should not be necessary to collect significant quantities of additional information, except in relation to the most senior layers of the institutional structure.
- 7 Institutional review is in this sense a continuous process, with each subject review contributing information to the overall picture. That picture will help determine the intensity of scrutiny needed to report reliably in subsequent subject reviews, and to make the summative judgements on overall institutional systems once in each cycle.
- 8 For both subjects and institutions, the method of academic review will be centred on self-evaluation documents produced by the institution. Guidance on the preparation of self-evaluation documents is provided in the annexes to this *Handbook*. The first task for academic reviewers is to test, by means of their own observations and analyses, the statements made by institutions in their self-evaluation documents. Secondly, they will make judgements on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the provision, as outlined above.

Code of practice

- 9 The Agency publishes a *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, with sections addressing good practice in individual areas of academic management. Those sections relating directly to quality and standards provide both institutions and reviewers with a background against which judgements can be made. Reviewers will expect institutional systems to have at least an 'equivalent effect' to the precepts of the *Code*.
- 10 Academic reviewers should ensure that they are familiar with the *Code*. In particular they should be aware of the precepts in the following sections which deal directly with quality and standards:
 - programme approval, monitoring and review;
 - assessment of students;
 - external examining; and
 - collaborative provision.

The precepts in these sections provide criteria against which academic reviewers can make their judgements on both subject provision and institutional management.

Intensity of scrutiny

- 11 There is a proper expectation that any system of quality assurance will be as efficient as possible and will consume no more overall resource than is necessary. To this end, the method used by the Agency:
 - provides transparency of process through the use of qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice*;
 - involves exchange of information between the subject and institutional review processes, thereby reducing duplication to a minimum;
 - allows institutions to negotiate the timing and aggregation of subject reviews. This enables external review to be aligned with internal review, re-validation or professional and statutory body timetables, should an institution so wish;

- facilitates alignment of subject review with internal processes by spreading reviews over a period rather than imposing a 'snapshot' style review visit. Thus evidence from internal processes can be made available to reviewers on request, so that the need for the preparation and assembly of large amounts of documentation in advance of a visit is removed;
 - ensures that the amount of time taken to conduct a subject review is the minimum necessary to enable reliable judgements to be made.
- 12 Any process of scrutiny should evolve from one of universal intensity to one in which intervention is in inverse proportion to success. Where the Agency has confidence in an institution's ability to assure quality and standards, a lower intensity of review (a 'lighter touch') may be expected, but where there is no convincing evidence of robust and effective systems, greater intensity may be necessary. However, in the case of subject review, the Agency reserves the right to conduct a limited sample of reviews at a standard intensity, even in those institutions with the best record, as a means of refreshing the evidence base.

The review method

- 13 Part 1 of this *Handbook* describes the methods used for the review of subject quality and standards. Programmes taught at sub-degree, degree and postgraduate levels are reviewed, including programmes franchised to other UK institutions.

Understanding the process

Subjects and programmes

- 14 The *Handbook* refers to both subjects and programmes. The Agency reports on academic provision in 42 broad subject areas (listed in Annex K). For each subject, benchmark information (see paragraphs 34 to 36) is produced.
- 15 'Programme' refers to the programmes of study followed by students. Programmes may be offered at different levels (eg HND, honours degree or taught master's degree) within a single subject. A programme may be multi-disciplinary, for example a joint honours degree. The term 'programme' may refer also to the main pathways through a modular scheme, which itself may include several subjects.
- 16 The unit of review is the subject. Institutions may ask for a group of subjects to be reviewed together, particularly where they are linked by joint programmes or by modular pathways.

Main features of the method

- 17 This section of the *Handbook* describes the main features of the method used to conduct subject reviews. The features are grouped under the following headings:
- Preparing for review;
 - Points of reference for review;
 - Conducting the review;
 - Judgements and reports.

Preparing for review

Scope and preference surveys

- 18 The 2000-2006 cycle of subject review is divided into two three-year periods. Approximately one year before the commencement of each period, every institution will be asked to complete a 'scope and preference' information form. This is designed to gather information about the range of subjects offered, the programmes to be included under each subject heading, the estimated numbers of student FTEs for each programme, the institution's preferred timing for the review of each subject and any preferences for subjects to be reviewed together. This advance information provides a basis for further discussions with each institution to plan and agree the scope and timing of academic reviews for the three-year period.
- 19 As far as possible, the Agency will seek to accommodate the preferences for the timing of reviews expressed by institutions. However, the balance of the Agency's overall workload needs to be maintained across the three years of the review programme, and the overall schedule must take into account the availability of academic reviewers with appropriate expertise. Where 'scope and preference' responses indicate that a preferred timing is to enable a review to coincide with a scheduled internal review, or with an accreditation visit by a professional or statutory body with an interest in the same provision, priority will be given to accommodating such preferences.

Initial profiles

- 20 The integrated method described in this *Handbook* requires mutual exchange of information between subject and institutional reviews. Reports of institutional reviews will inform the approach to the review of individual subjects by providing an indication of the degree of confidence that can be placed in the effectiveness of institutional quality assurance processes. This will help determine the intensity of scrutiny that is appropriate for subject review. In the early stages of the 2000–2006 review cycle, few institutional reviews will have been conducted with the aim of providing such information. Accordingly, the Agency will use instead specially prepared initial profiles to commence a dialogue with each institution about the overall approach to and intensity of review.
- 21 The Agency has considerable information about individual institutions, derived from previous quality assessments and quality audits. This information will be used to prepare a profile of each institution, which will be shared with the institution concerned, but not published. Each profile will summarise evidence related to the broad aims of the institution, the appropriateness of the curricula to deliver intended learning outcomes, the quality of curricular delivery and student learning, student support and progression, learning resources and student achievement. Further details are provided in Annex B.
- 22 On the basis of the profile, the Agency will discuss with each institution the approach to subject reviews for the subsequent three-year period. For each subject, the initial profile, previous subject report(s), and other relevant and available information (eg accreditation reports by a professional body) will be used to reach a provisional view on the amount of reviewer activity needed to allow reliable judgements to be made. Subsequently, analysis of the self-evaluation document by the team of academic reviewers will be used to confirm, or vary, the likely intensity of the review. Finally, once the review has commenced, it is open to reviewers to indicate if they believe that the review requires more or less reviewer time than agreed. In that event, the Agency will contact the institution in order to agree any change to the pattern of review activity.
- 23 Initial profiles and reviews will not be used to band institutions, with differing intensities of scrutiny applying to each band. Higher education institutions are large, complex organisations with balances of strengths and weaknesses. They cannot be differentiated in such a simplistic way. Individual judgements will be made that will take into account also the perceptions of the institution about its own strengths and weaknesses, its effectiveness in identifying and addressing any weaknesses, and any trends identifiable from the overall track record of results of subject reviews.

Self-evaluation documents and programme specifications (Annexes C, D)

- 24 The self-evaluation document is central to the process of subject review, and fulfils two main functions. First, it is intended to encourage the subject provider to evaluate the quality of the learning opportunities offered to students and the standards achieved by them. It provides an opportunity for the staff of the subject provider to reflect on 'what do we do?', 'why we do it', and 'why do we do it in the way that we do?'. Academic reviewers will expect to see evidence of careful self-analysis. This should involve an evaluation of the perceived strengths of the provision, with reference to the evidence which justifies the statements made, and of weaknesses, where these are recognised. Where weaknesses are acknowledged, the subject provider is encouraged to discuss the issues and the steps being taken to bring about improvements.
- 25 Second, the document provides a framework for a process of academic review based on the testing and verification of statements made by subject providers. The document should reflect on current provision in a manner that evaluates both strengths and weaknesses, indicates the changes that have taken place since earlier external reviews, and considers what may be necessary to change in the future. It is the most important of the small number of documents made available to reviewers in advance of a review.

- 26 Guidelines for producing self-evaluation documents appear at Annex C. These guidelines are intended to ensure that institutions address the relevant issues, and include the material needed by academic reviewers prior to a review in order to obtain an accurate picture of the provision. A document prepared for internal review processes may be able to meet the guidelines, thus removing the need to prepare a separate self-evaluation purely for external review.
- 27 Institutions may wish to aggregate subjects for the purposes of review. This will be acceptable where the grouping is of cognate subjects, and can be justified by reference to the ways in which combinations of subjects are offered to students, eg through a modular scheme. Subjects proposed for aggregation must be proposed for review in the same year. Self-evaluation documents must cover all provision that is included within any such grouping, either as a single document, or as a coherently related set of documents. If reviewers find that programmes within a grouping, of a particular kind, or at a particular level, are performing significantly differently from the generality of programmes in that grouping, separate judgements will be made and reported on those programmes.
- 28 Specifications for each of the programmes included must be annexed to the self-evaluation in order to make them readily available for academic reviewers. The specifications should provide the core factual information about the programmes, allowing the self-evaluation itself to provide a reflective analysis of the provision and its development.
- 29 Programme specifications should make explicit the intended outcomes in terms of knowledge and understanding, and skills and other attributes. They should help students to understand what is expected of them. They should enable teaching teams to articulate the teaching and learning methods that enable students to achieve the outcomes; the assessment methods that enable achievement to be demonstrated; and the relationship of the programme and its study elements to the qualifications framework and to any subsequent professional qualification or career path.
- 30 To be most effective, programme specifications should become part of an institution's curricular planning, approval and review processes. Preparation of them is an opportunity for teaching teams to reflect on the purposes and intended outcomes of their provision. Programme specifications will be the starting point for academic reviewers as they seek to understand the intended outcomes and the assessment methods for the programmes under review. The Agency has provided information to assist in the preparation of these documents (Annex D).
- 31 The self-evaluation will be required approximately one month before commencement of the period (usually the academic year) in which the subject review will take place. If a review period commences later in the academic year (for example, to coincide with an internal review), a submission date will be agreed with the institution.

Points of reference for review of standards

Qualifications framework

- 32 The framework of higher education qualifications provides reference points to be used to determine whether the intended outcomes for programmes, and actual student achievement are appropriate to the level of the qualification awarded. The framework helps provide public assurance that qualifications bearing similar titles represent similar levels of achievement. There are two qualifications frameworks, one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and one for Scotland. There are points of alignment between the two frameworks, particularly at postgraduate level. This *Handbook* refers to the qualifications framework in the singular. This is to avoid confusion as, in general, only one framework will apply to any one HE institution.

- 33 Implementation of the framework will take place over the first six-year cycle of academic review. In making judgements about the provision under review, academic reviewers will recognise that institutions may need time to ensure that all of their provision is aligned with the framework.

Subject benchmark statements

- 34 Subject benchmarks are statements which represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in a particular subject area. Benchmarking is not about listing specific knowledge; that is a matter for institutions in designing individual programmes. It is about the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity; about the intellectual capability and understanding that should be developed through the study of the discipline to the level in question; the techniques and skills which are associated with developing understanding in the discipline; and the intellectual demand and challenge appropriate to study of the discipline to the level in question.
- 35 Reviewers will use relevant benchmark statements as a means of determining whether the intended learning outcomes of individual programmes are appropriate. Institutions should be able to demonstrate how subject benchmark statements have been used to inform decisions about the intended outcomes of programmes, and in calibrating the overall demands of the assessment framework. The Agency recognises that institutions have their own cycles of programme review, and that it is through these that any changes, to reflect benchmark statements, will come. Reviewers will be sensitive to the challenges that institutions will face in working with benchmark statements for the first time. Nevertheless, benchmark statements provide an immediate starting point for discussion and reflection within teaching teams, and between teaching teams and academic reviewers, about the appropriateness of the outcomes of their programmes. Over time, benchmark statements will be revised in the light of feedback from subject communities.
- 36 For some programmes more than one benchmark statement may be relevant, while in some specialist, innovative or inter-disciplinary fields there may not be any statement that is of direct relevance. In such cases, the level descriptors of the overall qualifications framework, and the guidance in the *Code of practice* section on programme approval, monitoring and review, will assist institutions in ensuring that their provision meets generally accepted standards for a given level of award. In all cases the institution remains responsible for identifying and assuring the standards of its awards and for ensuring that they reflect appropriate external indicators.

Conducting the review

Peer review

- 37 Peer review enables judgements to be made by those who understand the subject under scrutiny and who are familiar with teaching and learning processes. It enables judgements to be credible to, and to command the respect of, subject providers. For a peer review process to have credibility with external stakeholders, such as employers and potential students, judgements must be made in a transparent manner, and reported publicly.
- 38 Subject review is carried out by a team of subject specialists, whose main responsibility is to read, analyse and test the self-evaluation produced by the institution, and to gather whatever further evidence they need to make the judgements described later in this *Handbook*. Subject specialist reviewers are drawn mainly from the higher education sector, although nominations and applications from industry, commerce and the professions are actively sought by the Agency. Subject specialists are trained and briefed by the Agency before taking part in reviews. Further details of their function may be found in Annex A. For a note on the composition of teams, see Annex G.

- 39 Management of each review and liaison with the institution is the responsibility of a review coordinator. Coordinators are not specialists in the subject under scrutiny, but individuals with extensive experience of HE and quality assurance. Each is provided with training specific to their coordinating function and each attends at least one specialist reviewer training course. Further details of their function are given in Annex A.

Review against the broad aims of the provider

- 40 Subject providers should be able to set out clearly the broad aims of their programmes. Such statements should indicate, in general terms, what the subject provider is seeking to achieve, how these aims relate to external indicators (such as subject benchmark statements, professional body requirements, or employer expectations), and the general attributes of its graduates. These broad aims will provide the context in which the review takes place. Accordingly, the Agency will expect the aims of the provision to be stated at the beginning of any self-evaluation and will publish the aims in the subject review report. The statement must be sufficiently clear to allow intended learning outcomes to be set which ensure that the aims are achieved, and to provide a sound basis for the subject review to be planned and carried out.

Review over an extended period

- 41 Spreading the available reviewer days over a period should allow reviewers to gain a better understanding of the subject provision than is possible in a concentrated, 'snapshot' use of the same number of days. It reduces the need to prepare large amounts of documentation in preparation for a single visit. Spreading review activity over a period will enable academic reviewers to observe, when appropriate and by arrangement with the subject provider, internal quality assurance 'events', such as programme committee meetings, programme approval events, and examination and assessment boards, and thus to use documentation already prepared for internal quality assurance purposes.
- 42 In addition, academic reviewers will be able to:
- visit the subject provider at mutually convenient times over a period;
 - attend relevant internal events as observers by invitation;
 - carry out off-site desk-based analyses of information and data;
 - vary the pattern of visiting according to the confidence placed in the quality assurance systems operated by the subject provider.

Judgements and reports

Judgements on academic standards

- 43 Judgements are made on the academic standards in each subject under scrutiny. Where a group of subjects is aggregated so as to be reviewed together, a separate judgement is made on each to enable strengths and weaknesses in individual subjects to be identified. These judgements focus on whether intended learning outcomes are appropriate and whether the outcomes achieved are consistent with the intentions. The judgements are not graded; either the intended outcomes are appropriate and are achieved, or they are not. Reviewers will make their judgement accordingly, that there can be confidence, or not, in the standards of the provision. If standards are being achieved, but reviewers have concerns about the ability of the institution to maintain them into the future, a judgement of 'limited confidence' may be made. If a failure to achieve standards has occurred in programmes at one level only, and there is confidence in standards at other levels, the failing level will be identified separately. The issues which academic reviewers must address in order to make these judgements are described in greater detail in later sections of this *Handbook* and in the *aide-mémoire* for academic review (Annex E).

- 44 Where an expression of **'limited confidence'** in academic standards is made, academic reviewers must identify areas where improvement is needed. The subject provider may then be asked to prepare an improvement strategy, implementation of which is monitored by the Agency. If a judgement is made that standards are not being achieved, there will be a further, formal review by the Agency within one calendar year. If standards continue not to be achieved, funding is potentially at risk.

Judgements on quality of learning opportunities

- 45 For each subject, and through the same process of scrutiny, the quality of the provision is reviewed. Judgements are made about the extent to which the three aspects of provision outlined below contribute to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes in the subject area under review:
- teaching and learning;
 - student progression;
 - effective utilisation of learning resources.

This part of the academic review process focuses on the learning opportunities that enable students to achieve the academic standards established by the subject provider.

Judgements on groups of programmes and individual programmes

- 46 Each review of a subject will usually cover a number of programmes, sometimes at different levels. Subjects may also be aggregated for the purposes of review. In most cases, a judgement on standards or quality may be made with confidence for all programmes in that subject area, or grouping. However, if a particular programme, subject or level is performing significantly better or worse than the generality of provision within the unit of review, it will be commented on separately in the review report. This is designed to ensure that there is no averaging of overall performance that could conceal good practice deserving praise or shortcomings that require attention.

Subject review reports

- 47 At the end of each subject review, a report of approximately 4,000 words is published which describes the findings of the team of reviewers. It is the main documented outcome of the review process and provides the main feedback to the institution and its subject provider. The report will include:
- a brief description of the review method;
 - the overall aims of the subject provider;
 - an evaluation of the quality of the learning opportunities provided and the academic standards achieved;
 - the conclusions reached and the judgements made;
 - a one-page summary of the main conclusions.
- 48 Reporting on the quality of learning opportunities takes the form of a narrative commentary on each of the three aspects of provision. The commentaries will identify particular strengths and weaknesses and will place each aspect into one of three categories: **'failing'**, **'approved'** or **'commendable'**. Within the **'commendable'** category, exemplary features may also be identified. Further details of the categories and the criteria for judgements are given in paragraphs 88 to 94 of this *Handbook*.
- 49 Reporting on standards takes the form of a narrative commentary which addresses strengths and weaknesses by reference (where appropriate) to the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, subject benchmark statements, and the qualifications framework, and leads to the

overall judgement. The narrative may identify matters for particular commendation or matters of concern, including the ability of the institution to maintain standards into the future. While a point of concern need not mean that standards are not being achieved, several points of concern may mean that there is limited confidence in the ability of the subject provider to maintain standards. Where weaknesses exist which, if uncorrected, could imperil standards, it is important that there is a mechanism to ensure that appropriate corrective action is taken.

- 50 Potential students, employers and other members of the public require clear and concise information about the provision within a subject that allows them to distinguish between different providers of similar programmes. For this purpose, each subject report will contain a one-page summary of the findings and judgements made on both quality and standards.
- 51 Draft reports are sent to the institution for comment on matters of factual accuracy. Feedback on the review is provided to the institution through the draft report. As the review may take place over a period, and include both off-site consideration of written material and on-site observation and meetings, there is not a formal concluding session at which oral feedback is given to the institution. The Agency aims to publish reports, on its web site, within 20 weeks from the end of a review.
- 52 On completion of the schedule of the reviews in a particular subject area, a subject overview report is published. In the light of this report the subject community will be invited to consider any adjustment to the subject benchmark statement as may be necessary. The overview reports are designed to record the findings of the review teams and to promote best practice.

How the process works

Preparation for subject review

Liaison between the institution and the review team

- 53 Institutions may nominate a subject review facilitator for each review to facilitate liaison between the team of reviewers and the institution, and to ensure that the team obtains accurate and comprehensive information about the subject provision and its institutional context. Institutions may find it convenient to nominate the same facilitator for a number of reviews. The Agency offers briefing sessions for facilitators.

Further details of the role of a subject review facilitator are given in **Annex F**.

Advance planning and preparatory meetings

- 54 Advance planning begins with the return by institutions of replies to the 'scope and preference' enquiry made before the start of the first or second half of the review cycle. If the Agency is able to agree the proposed distribution of subjects for review across the three year period, the institution will be notified of this. If there are operational reasons why the preferred pattern cannot be accommodated, the matter will be discussed with the institution, with a view to reaching agreement on a revised pattern. In the absence of agreement, the Agency will notify the institution of the distribution of subjects that will be adopted over the period.
- 55 Some six months before the start of each academic year, the Agency will initiate a discussion with each institution about the pattern of review that appears appropriate for each subject due to be reviewed in that year. These discussions will take as a starting point the initial profile, based on historical evidence about the institution as a whole; evidence about performance in the subject(s) in question, from the previous subject review(s); and any available accreditation reports by professional or statutory bodies. The institution will be invited to suggest the most appropriate pattern of review activity, having regard for the timing of any relevant internal

events or accreditation visits. The Agency will then seek to reach agreement with the institution on the pattern, timing and intensity of review activity for each subject, or group of subjects. In the absence of agreement, the decision of the Agency will be final.

- 56 The Agency will consider the intensity of scrutiny likely to be necessary to enable valid and reliable judgements to be made. On the one hand, it will seek to verify continuity of a record of good practice, which might indicate that a relatively low intensity is needed. On the other hand, where there has been less good or unsatisfactory practice, a relatively higher intensity is likely to be needed, to enable the reviewers to establish whether improvements have been made. Statements from academic audit and institutional review reports about the level of confidence that may be placed in institutional management of quality and standards will be taken into account.
- 57 Indicators of good practice, drawn from institutional and subject review reports, might include:
- positive commendations;
 - few negative statements;
 - few recommendations for attention;
 - no 'essential' recommendations from institutional review reports;
 - evidence of management of quality and standards in line with the expectations of good practice expressed in the *Code of practice*;
 - no suggestions of differential performance by level or mode.
- 58 Indicators of a need for improvement, drawn from institutional and subject review reports might include:
- recommendations for action;
 - issues highlighted for attention;
 - grade(s) 2 or below (or equivalent) in subject review graded profile(s);
 - 'essential' recommendations from institutional review reports;
 - evidence that the management of quality and standards is not in line with the expectations of good practice expressed in the *Code of practice*;
 - suggestions of differential performance between levels and modes.

Academic review teams

- 59 The number of academic reviewers in each team will reflect the size, range and complexity of the education provided. As far as possible, within the resources available, the Agency will match the expertise of the team of reviewers with the broad specialisms of the subject provision under scrutiny. The criteria for team composition are in Annex G. The role of reviewers is set out in Annex A.
- 60 A register of reviewers is published by the Agency.
- 61 The proposed composition of a review team will be notified to the institution. Any concerns about the composition of a team, for example because of a conflict of interest of which the Agency is unaware, must be notified to the Agency within four weeks. If a review is to be combined with accreditation by a professional or statutory body, composition of the team will be discussed with that body.

Analysis of the self-evaluation

- 62 The review team will use the self-evaluation prepared by the institution to help to set priorities for and to plan the review. Reviewers will consider whether the broad aims of the provision are

clear; and whether the intended learning outcomes allow the aims to be achieved. The reviewers will consider whether:

- the aims are an adequate expression of the broad educational purposes of the provision;
- the aims reflect appropriately any relevant subject benchmarks;
- there is a clear relationship between the broad aims and the intended learning outcomes.

If the aims, or their relationship with the intended learning outcomes, are unclear, the provider will be asked for clarification before the review proceeds.

- 63 Each section of the self-evaluation will be assessed to ensure that it is evaluative, rather than merely descriptive. An institution may be asked to revise a document if it fails to provide a suitable basis for the review.

Conducting the review

General approach

- 64 Reviews are intended to be conducted in a spirit of dialogue and cooperation between the institutions, their subject staff, and the review teams. Reviewers must be able to gather sufficient evidence on the subject provision to allow them to test statements made in the self-evaluation, and to form robust judgements on the quality and standards of the provision.
- 65 At its first meeting, the review team will consider the:
- self-evaluation and any other documentation supplied by the institution prior to the review;
 - scope and nature of the provision;
 - main matters for review and judgement;
 - role of the facilitator in relation to the conduct of the review;
 - allocation of individual responsibilities amongst the members of the team;
 - programme activities, both on- and off-site, required for the review;
 - pattern and timing of visits to the subject provider.
- 66 The review team will then hold an initial meeting with the subject provider. The provider may wish to make a brief presentation to introduce the provision to be reviewed, and to describe any developments since the self-evaluation was prepared. The review coordinator will remind both the team and the institutional representatives of the method and protocols of review. Reviewers will agree an outline programme for the review and will establish the:
- range of student work which can be made available for scrutiny, and the extent to which this constitutes a representative sample of student achievement in the subject;
 - nature of relevant documentation held by the institution and its availability for scrutiny by reviewers;
 - range and timing of internal quality assurance 'events', such as programme committees, faculty boards (or equivalent) or examination boards, which might provide documentary evidence and/or be attended (by agreement with the subject provider) by reviewers;
 - timing of any related visits by professional or statutory bodies;
 - probable agenda and timing of meetings with academic staff, students and former students;
 - other practical arrangements for the review.
- 67 The review team will not normally ask for specially-prepared documentation, other than the self-evaluation. It will endeavour to make use of existing documentation used for internal

processes related to quality and standards. The pattern of review activity over a period will enable material to be requested well in advance of any visit to the institution. Annex H summarises the range of documentation to which reviewers expect to have access and also provides guidance on the student work to be made available. In most cases, subject providers will be able to identify appropriate samples from work completed by students in the current academic year or from materials kept routinely for examination purposes.

Testing the self-evaluation and gathering evidence

- 68 The review method provides a structure for the self-evaluation, and for the visits, judgements and reports made by reviewers. It involves addressing:
- subject provision and aims;
 - learning outcomes;
 - curricula and assessment;
 - quality of learning opportunities;
 - student achievement;
 - maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards.

As may be seen in Annexes C and E, the self-evaluation is written to this framework and the *aide-mémoire* for subject review is structured similarly.

- 69 Assessment of the quality of subject provision and of academic standards achieved is through a combination of direct observation and scrutiny of documentary evidence. Documentary evidence includes internal reports from committees, boards and individual staff with relevant responsibilities; and external reports from examiners, employers, validating and accrediting bodies. Emerging judgements are refined and tested against as wide a range of evidence as possible; for example, the views expressed in meetings by staff or by students are tested against the documentation provided.
- 70 Academic reviewers may not need to make direct observations of teaching where a subject provider can provide evidence of good quality delivery. Such evidence is likely to come from internal peer review; from student questionnaires and other arrangements for gathering feedback; from the deployment of learning resources; and from student performance in assessments. Direct observation of teaching will be required if:
- there are issues that reviewers feel would be best addressed by such observation;
 - observation might help confirm a judgement about exemplary provision;
 - there is insufficient other evidence that effective delivery is being achieved; or
 - there are indications that the learning opportunities for students are less than satisfactory.

A note on observation of teaching is at Annex I.

- 71 Each review includes a number of meetings between members of the institution and reviewers to consider the various aspects of provision related to quality and standards. The review coordinator is responsible for ensuring that the review team meets sufficiently often to consider the accumulating evidence and the team's findings. If such meetings take place at the institution, the team may find it helpful to include the facilitator, who can provide factual information relevant to the team's discussions. However, the facilitator may not attend team meetings or parts of meetings at which direct discussion of judgements takes place.
- 72 The views of students are important, but should be treated as one source of evidence among several. Meetings with students enable reviewers to establish the students':
- understanding of the overall aims and intended learning outcomes;
 - responses to the teaching;

- learning experiences;
- views on academic support and the resources available;
- feedback and representation arrangements.

The facilitator does not attend these meetings but may be consulted about the issues raised by the students. Arrangements for meetings with students are set out in Annex J.

The reviewers may also seek the views of former students, their employers, and representatives from relevant industries or professions.

- 73 All reviewers are expected to identify, share, consider and evaluate evidence related to the programmes under scrutiny. Reviewers should keep notes of all meetings with staff and students, of their observations, and of comments on the quality of students' work and its assessment. Notes should be analytical rather than merely descriptive, and should refer to sources of information as well as to direct observations. Strengths and weaknesses should be summarised. Circulation of notes within the review team, and collation by the review coordinator, will assist in developing a collective evidence base on which judgements can be made.
- 74 Team meetings are used to review the evidence gathered, form preliminary judgements, and determine which issues require further exploration. Reviewers are expected to evaluate how the evidence gathered compares with the self-evaluation prepared by the subject provider and to test the strength of the evidence adduced to support the judgements. Discussion of the emerging judgements must involve the whole review team.

Making judgements

Evidence

- 75 The subject review *aide-mémoire* at Annex E provides guidance on the questions likely to lead to the evidence necessary to make judgements about academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.
- 76 The collective judgements of the review team should be informed by the totality of evidence accumulated. Accordingly, all team members are expected to share information they have gathered which appears relevant to any matter on which judgement is to be made.
- 77 Judgements about academic standards will be made on the appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes set by the subject provider in relation to subject benchmark statements, qualification levels and the overall aims of the provision; on the effectiveness of curricular content and assessment arrangements in relation to the intended learning outcomes; and on actual student achievement.
- 78 Judgements about the quality of learning opportunities will be made on the effectiveness of teaching and the learning opportunities provided; on the effectiveness of the use of learning resources (including human resources); and on the effectiveness of the support provided to students to enable them to progress within the programme.
- 79 Reviewers will seek to establish that:
- intended learning outcomes are clearly expressed, and reflect appropriately relevant subject benchmark statements and the overall aims of the programme;
 - curricular content supports the intended outcomes, and that assessments measure appropriately their achievement;
 - there is effective communication to staff and students, so that learners and teachers know what is expected of them.

- 80 Reviewers will seek to establish, by reference to subject benchmark statements where appropriate, that the design of the curriculum facilitates:
- acquisition of knowledge and understanding;
 - acquisition of cognitive skills;
 - acquisition of subject-specific skills, including practical and professional skills;
 - acquisition of transferable skills;
 - progression to employment and/or further study.

Judgements on academic standards

- 81 A single, threshold judgement is made about academic standards. Having regard to all the matters listed below, reviewers will decide whether they have confidence in the academic standards of the provision under review. A 'confidence' judgement will be made if reviewers are satisfied both with current standards, and with the prospect of those standards being maintained into the future. If standards are being achieved, but there is doubt about the ability of the institution to maintain them into the future, reviewers will make a judgement of 'limited confidence'. If, in relation to any of the matters listed below, reviewers feel that arrangements are inadequate to enable standards to be achieved or demonstrated, then their overall judgement will be that they do not have confidence in the academic standards of the provision under review.
- 82 Reviewers will assess, for each programme, whether there are clear learning outcomes which appropriately reflect applicable subject benchmark statements and the level of the award. Subject benchmark statements represent general expectations about standards in an academic discipline, particularly in relation to intellectual demand and challenge. The qualifications framework sets expectations for awards at a given level more generally. Reference points are thereby provided to assist reviewers in determining whether provision is meeting the standards expected by the academic community generally, for awards of a particular type and level. If the intended learning outcomes are found not to match those expectations, it would be unlikely that reviewers could have confidence in the standards of the provision. An example of potential failure would be if a postgraduate programme has learning outcomes set at an undergraduate level only.
- 83 Reviewers will assess whether the content and design of the curriculum are effective in achieving the intended programme outcomes. It is the curriculum that ensures that students are able to meet the intended outcomes of the programme. Providers should be able to demonstrate how each outcome is supported by the curriculum. 'Curriculum' for this purpose includes both the content necessary to develop understanding and the acquisition of knowledge, and the opportunities to develop practical skills and abilities where these are stated as intended outcomes. If significant intended learning outcomes are found to be unsupported by the curriculum, it would be unlikely that reviewers could have confidence in the standards of the provision.
- 84 Reviewers will assess whether the curriculum content is appropriate to each stage of the programme, and to the level of the award. Providers should be able to demonstrate how the design of the curriculum secures academic and intellectual progression by imposing increasing demands on the learner, over time, in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the capacity for conceptualisation, and increasing autonomy in learning. Reviewers will have regard to the guidance on programme design in the section of the *Code of practice* on programme approval, monitoring and review.
- 85 Reviewers will assess whether assessment is designed appropriately to measure achievement of the intended outcomes. Providers should be able to demonstrate that achievement of intended outcomes is assessed, and that, in each case, the assessment method selected is appropriate to

the nature of the intended outcome. There must also be confidence in the security and integrity of the assessment process, with appropriate involvement of external examiners. An assessment strategy should also have a formative function, providing students with prompt feedback, and assisting them in the development of their intellectual skills. There should be clear and appropriate criteria for different classes of performance, and these criteria should be communicated effectively to students. If significant intended learning outcomes appear not to be assessed, or if there are serious doubts about the integrity of the assessment procedures, it would be unlikely that reviewers could have confidence in the standards of the provision. Reviewers will have regard to the section of the *Code of practice* on assessment of students.

- 86 Reviewers will assess whether student achievement matches the intended outcomes and level of the award. Reviewers will consider external examiners' reports from the three years prior to the review, and will themselves sample student work. The balance between reliance upon the reports of external examiners and direct sampling of student work will depend on the confidence that reviewers have in the external examining arrangements of the institution. Regard will be had to the section of the *Code of practice* on external examining.
- 87 Where a review covers a number of subjects, separate judgements on standards will be made in respect of each subject. Where programmes are offered at more than one level, separate judgements will be made in respect of each level, if there are significant differences between them. In all cases, reports will contain a narrative commentary on strengths and weaknesses in relation to each aspect of the standards judgement.

Judgements on quality of learning opportunities

- 88 Judgements about the quality of the learning opportunities offered to students will be made against the broad aims of the provision and the intended learning outcomes of the programmes. Judgements will normally cover all provision within the scope of the review. However, if performance is significantly different in a subject area, or at a particular level, separate judgements will be made.
- 89 Reviewers will assess the effectiveness of **teaching and learning**, in relation to curriculum content and programme aims. They will consider large and small group teaching, practical sessions, directed individual learning, the integration of skills within curricula, and distance learning. Reviewers will evaluate the breadth, depth, pace and challenge of teaching; whether there is a suitable variety of teaching methods; the effectiveness of the teaching of subject knowledge; and subject-specific, transferable and practical skills.
- 90 Reviewers will evaluate **student progression** by considering recruitment, academic support, and progression within the programme. They will assess whether there is appropriate matching of the abilities of students recruited to the demands of programmes; and whether there are appropriate arrangements for induction and identification of any special learning needs. They will assess the effectiveness of academic support to individuals, including tutorial arrangements and feedback on progress. They will consider general progression within programmes, as well as non-completion rates.
- 91 In making judgements about **learning resources**, reviewers will assess whether the minimum resource necessary to deliver each programme is available, and will then consider how effectively resources are utilised in support of the intended learning outcomes of the programmes under review. Consideration will be given to the use of equipment (including IT), accommodation (including laboratories), and the library (including electronic resources). Reviewers will look for a strategic approach to the linkage of resources to programme objectives. Effective utilisation of academic, technical and administrative staff will be considered, as will the matching of the qualifications, experience and expertise of teaching staff to the requirements of the programmes.

92 Reporting on the quality of learning opportunities will place each of the three aspects of provision into one of three categories, 'failing', 'approved' or 'commendable', and will be made on the following basis:

- provision makes a less than adequate contribution to the achievement of the intended outcomes. Significant improvement is required urgently if the provision is to become at least adequate. In the summary report, this judgement will be referred to as 'failing';
- provision enables the intended outcomes to be achieved, but improvement is needed to overcome weaknesses. In the summary report, this judgement will be referred to as 'approved'. The summary will normally include a statement containing the phrase 'approved, but...', which will set out the areas where improvement is needed;
- provision contributes substantially to the achievement of the intended outcomes, with most elements demonstrating good practice. In the summary report, this judgement will be referred to as 'commendable'.

93 Within the 'commendable' category, reviewers will identify any specific features of the aspect of provision that are exemplary. To be deemed 'exemplary', a feature must:

- represent sector-leading best practice; and
- be worthy of dissemination to, and emulation by, other providers of comparable programmes; and
- make a significant contribution to the success of the provision being assessed. Incidental or marginal features do not qualify for designation.

The characteristics of exemplary features will, by their nature, vary between institutions and programmes. The criteria listed above will ensure that features identified as 'exemplary' will be broadly comparable in weight and significance.

94 If provision is found to be failing in any aspect of quality, or if reviewers have no confidence in the standards achieved, the provision will be regarded, overall, as 'failing'. It follows that all provision that is not failing is 'approved'. The report of the review will state whether or not provision is approved.

Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

95 Institution-wide systems for the management and enhancement of standards and quality are addressed through institutional review. Subject reviewers will gather evidence, not least from their discussions with staff and students and their scrutiny of external examiners' reports, on the operation of institutional systems in each subject area. The final section of the subject report will express their confidence, or otherwise, in the ability of the institution to maintain and enhance quality and standards in the particular subject. These views will inform the subsequent institutional review.

- 96 Part 2 of the *Handbook* describes the method used for the review of institutional management of academic standards and quality.

The purpose of and approach to institutional review

- 97 Institutional review addresses the ultimate responsibility for the management of quality and standards that rests with the institution as a whole. It is concerned particularly with the way an institution exercises its powers as a body able to grant degrees and/or other awards. It results in reports on the degree of confidence that may reasonably be placed in an institution's effectiveness in managing the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes.
- 98 The process of whole institution review is a continuous and dynamic engagement with the institution and its internal processes over the six years of the review cycle. Much of this engagement is through the sequence of subject reviews during the cycle, which will generate considerable evidence about the way in which institutional systems are working in practice. Nevertheless, there remains a 'senior layer' in the institutional structure where the overall responsibility for quality and standards resides, and which provides the focus for an overall, 'capstone' review of the effectiveness of management of that responsibility.
- 99 Specifically, institutional review addresses the robustness and security of the systems supporting an institution's awarding function. In most cases, these will relate to the exercise of the institution's own powers. Where an institution does not have direct awarding powers, the review will consider the exercise of any powers delegated under a validation or other collaborative agreement. Review will be concerned with:
- procedures for approval, monitoring and review of academic programmes;
 - procedures for acting on the findings of external examiners, subject reviews, and other external scrutinies;
 - overall management of assessment processes;
 - overall management of any credit systems;
 - management of collaborative arrangements with other institutions.

The *Code of practice* and the qualifications framework

- 100 Important points of reference for institutional review are provided by sections of the *Code of practice* (see Part 1, paragraphs 9 and 10) and the qualifications framework (see Part 1, paragraphs 32 and 33).
- 101 Institutions should have in place the means of meeting the expectations contained in the precepts of all sections of the *Code*. Institutional review will focus on those sections which deal directly with institutional responsibilities for quality and standards of academic provision, namely:
- programme approval, monitoring and review;
 - assessment of students;
 - external examining;
 - collaborative provision.
- 102 In the course of review, enquiries may be made about other sections of the *Code*. This is most likely to occur if there is information, from subject review or otherwise, which suggests that there may be difficulties or inadequacies in these areas.
- 103 In reviewing institutions' adherence to the precepts of the *Code of practice*, it is the intended effect of the precept which is important, not any particular means of achieving it. In certain cases, teams may wish to discuss why an institution has decided not to follow the guidance

contained in a section of the *Code*, but they will not criticise an institution for this if the intended effect of the *Code* is being achieved by other means.

The institutional profile

- 104 The Agency will maintain a dynamic profile of each institution. This will contain the conclusions from the Agency's most recent review of each subject, from the last institutional review, and from any separate reviews of collaborative provision. This profile will provide much of the primary evidence required for institutional review.
- 105 The profile, and the reports on which it is based, will provide institutional review teams with:
- examples of implementation of institutional quality assurance procedures;
 - examples of adherence to the precepts of the *Code of practice*;
 - trends in quality assurance practices;
 - possible problem areas for particular scrutiny at institutional level;
 - examples of good innovative quality assurance practices.
- 106 Institutional review will provide a summation and renewal of the institutional profile. Reporting on the degree of confidence that may be placed in an institution's management of its standards and quality will be a major factor in determining the intensity of scrutiny that is appropriate for subject reviews.
- 107 Until an institution has had an institutional review, using the method described in this *Handbook*, the Agency will use an initial profile (see Part 1, paragraphs 20 to 23, and Annex B) for discussions with institutions about intensity of scrutiny.

Review events

i Main review

- 108 Once in every six-year cycle a review team will visit each institution. The purpose of the review visit is to gain insight and understanding into the ways in which an institution is managing its quality of provision and the academic standards of its awards. It will last no longer than necessary for the review team to gather sufficient reliable evidence on which to base a report. In deciding the duration of the visit, regard will be had to the institutional profile and the institution's self-evaluation. Typically a visit will last two or three days, but in exceptional circumstances (eg in the case of a particularly large or complex organisation, or one which has not presented itself very effectively in its self-evaluation) it might be longer. Equally, for a small institution with a well-presented self-evaluation and limited range of provision, it might not be necessary to visit for longer than one day.
- 109 During the visit, the team will:
- test and verify (so far as possible) the judgements in the self-evaluation;
 - review with the institution any specific concerns arising from reviews of subjects or collaborative provision;
 - gather any further evidence necessary to enable it to form a view on the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for the overall management of quality and standards, and of its awarding function.

ii Interim appraisal

- 110 Every year, the Agency will discuss with each institution the pattern of review for subjects due for review in the following year (see Part 1, paragraph 55). Three years after the last full institutional review, this discussion will be extended to take stock more widely of the institution's

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performance in the maintenance, development and enhancement of its standards and quality of provision.

111 The purpose of this discussion will be to carry out an interim appraisal of the institutional profile generally, in the light of conclusions of subject reviews and any reviews of collaborative provision that have taken place in the last three years. Particular attention will be given to action taken in response to the findings of subject reviews and to action points from the previous institutional review.

112 The interim appraisal is an opportunity to:

- review progress in addressing action points from the previous institutional review, and consider whether action taken by the institution now warrants a different degree of confidence being placed in its systems;
- consider whether there are any recurring problems arising from subject reviews that require particular attention in future subject reviews;
- consider the general trends of subject reviews, action taken to follow up issues identified in them, and the impact such matters should have on future intensity of scrutiny.

113 The interim appraisal will normally be conducted by the member of the Agency's staff who is also conducting the discussion with the institution about the pattern of subject review for the following year. It will take the form of a structured discussion, on the day of the discussion about future subject review, with one or two of the senior staff of the institution responsible for quality and standards. The event will not normally involve the preparation of a self-evaluation or other special documentation. There will be no published report, but an agreed note will be kept of the matters discussed.

114 If subject reviews have disclosed a pattern of difficulties, the interim appraisal may be used in a more formal way to address these. In this event, the discussion may involve one or more academic reviewers as well as a member of the Agency's staff. The institution may be invited to provide a written commentary on the action it has taken to address the difficulties. In the light of the appraisal, the Agency may propose a further review of action to address the matter, or may bring forward the date of the main institutional review.

iii Collaborative activity

115 Collaborative activity is defined as a collaborative or partnership arrangement, with another institution or organisation, involving the provision of programmes of study and the granting of awards and qualifications. Arrangements which involve the implicit or explicit endorsement by the institution of third party services are also included in the definition, whether or not use of such services is a condition of registration for the institution's programme or award.

116 The purpose of the review of collaborative activity is to establish the extent to which an institution is:

- assuring the quality of programmes offered by, or in association with, a partner organisation for the institution's own awards;
- ensuring that the academic standards of its awards gained through study with partner organisations are the same as those applied within the institution itself.

117 An institution's management of its collaborative activity is included among the topics to be covered by the main review. Where the activity can be reviewed effectively through the main review alone, this will be done. There are two circumstances in which some or all of an institution's collaborative provision may be reviewed separately.

of matters where action is 'advisable'. The judgement will depend on the nature and weight of the 'advisable' action points.

126 In all other cases a statement will be made that overall confidence can be placed in institutional quality assurance systems. The term 'overall confidence' does not necessarily mean that there are no matters where improvement could be made; but minor weaknesses only should not place an institution in a lower category. The narrative of the report will discuss strengths and weaknesses, and will also identify exemplary features of the arrangements.

127 To be deemed 'exemplary', a feature must:

- represent sector-leading best practice; and
- be worthy of dissemination to, and emulation by, other institutions with comparable missions; and
- make a significant contribution to the success of overall institutional arrangements for assuring quality and standards.

The characteristics of exemplary features will, by their nature, vary between institutions, but such features will be broadly comparable in weight and significance.

128 Further information on reports is at Annex M.

ANNEX A Academic reviewers

Introduction

1 The Agency operates an equal opportunities policy. All applicants will be considered on the basis of their ability to meet the specifications outlined below. The Agency evaluates the performance of all reviewers, using feedback from review visits.

2 There are three types of academic reviewer used by the Agency:

- **subject specialist reviewers**, with current teaching experience in the discipline concerned, or experience of relevant professional or occupational practice;
- **review coordinators**, who lead subject review teams, and have extensive experience of quality assurance and programme approval in higher education, usually gained by working with such procedures in more than one discipline;
- **institutional reviewers**, who hold, or have recently held, senior management positions in higher education institutions.

Qualities required in all reviewers

3 Effective reviewers will possess the following qualities:

- demonstrable commitment to the principles of quality assurance in HE;
- an enquiring and sceptical disposition;
- powers of analysis and sound judgement;
- personal authority and presence coupled with the ability to act as an effective team member;
- good time management skills including experience of chairing meetings;
- the ability to make appropriate judgements in the context of complex institutions different from their own;
- experience of organisation and management, particularly in relation to teaching and learning matters;
- high standard of oral and written communication, preferably with experience of writing formal reports to published deadlines.

4 In addition, reviewers are expected to have a clear knowledge and understanding of the Agency's whole review process, a reasonable acquaintance with all published sections of the *Code of practice*, and a detailed working knowledge of those sections of the *Code* that are the subject of regular consideration in reviews.

Recruitment, training and role of subject specialist reviewers

5 Subject specialist reviewers are recruited by the Agency from individuals nominated by institutions or other organisations and from individuals who reply to advertisements. The Agency prefers to recruit reviewers who are available for the entire review period, but will also consider shorter involvement under some circumstances. Reviewers are recruited and trained to ensure that they are capable of carrying out their duties effectively. In particular, subject specialist reviewers who undertake reviews should:

- possess the knowledge and skills set out in detail below;
- have completed successfully the Agency's training programme;

- ensure that they are available for the whole period of a review for which they have been selected;
- normally be available for up to three reviews per year.

6 Training of reviewers is carried out on behalf of the Agency by means of two-day residential courses. The Agency will pay all travel and subsistence expenses incurred by reviewers, in line with its published travel and subsistence arrangements. It will not pay fees to reviewers for attendance at training courses.

7 The Agency publishes a register of subject specialist reviewers and makes this available to all institutions. The primary purpose of the register is to show, for each reviewer, the main areas of teaching and learning that s/he is qualified to review. For this purpose, the Agency uses the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS), established by HESA and UCAS for use by both organisations from 2002. As far as possible, the Agency ensures that the combined experience and expertise of the reviewers on its register reflects the range of the provision on offer across the HE sector.

8 The key purpose of acting as a subject specialist reviewer is to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of standards in higher education by reporting to the Agency on the standards and quality of the academic programmes scrutinised during subject reviews. Subject specialist reviewers are expected to agree individual timetables of activity with the review coordinator, with a view to making the most effective contribution to the review. The responsibilities of reviewers include:

- reading and analysing the self-evaluation prepared by the institution and any other documentation sent in advance of a review;
- participating in visits to the subject provider in order to gather, share, test and verify evidence;
- making judgements on the academic standards achieved and the quality of the learning opportunities provided;
- contributing to and commenting on the compilation of the report of the review.

The Agency not only tries to ensure that the particular experience of individual reviewers is relevant to the reviews they undertake, but that, over time, each reviewer works in a variety of teams scrutinising a range of institutions.

9 Subject specialists review and evaluate the self-evaluation provided for the subject, with particular emphasis on curricular contents and their suitability for achieving the programme outcomes.

10 Subject specialists review and evaluate the assessment processes designed for the programmes and determine whether they are suitable to assess programme outcomes as stated in the programme specifications.

11 Subject specialists judge the overall standards for subjects and the procedures associated with their maintenance and enhancement.

12 Subject specialists review and evaluate overall student achievement, including progression to employment; the contribution made to student achievement by the quality of teaching; opportunities for learning; academic support intended to ensure effective progression of students; and learning resources and their deployment (including staffing).

13 Finally, subject specialists contribute to the compilation of a report to the Agency. Each subject specialist will be expected to prepare material for the various sections of the report and may be expected to contribute to the writing.

Knowledge and skills required of subject specialist reviewers

14 To carry out the role outlined above, for each review subject specialists will need to demonstrate:

Experience, knowledge and understanding of HE

- at least five years' experience of providing teaching and learning in higher education or, in the case of industrially- or professionally-based reviewers, familiarity with higher education teaching and learning;
- familiarity with academic support strategies and the functions of academic tutorials;
- experience of examining (and preferably external examining);
- knowledge of the quality assurance processes employed by institutions providing higher education;

Knowledge and understanding within the subject area

- knowledge of the subject benchmark information produced for programmes within the relevant subject area;
- familiarity with the subject matter of the self-evaluation and the programme specifications written for the subject area;
- familiarity with comparable programmes and standards of awards in other institutions;
- understanding of external examiners' reports and internal documentation;
- understanding of programme entry requirements and ability to interpret progression statistics for each stage of the programmes, including withdrawal, transfer and failure rates;
- understanding of programme learning objectives;
- familiarity with destinations data and employment statistics;

Skills

- ability to conduct meetings and interviews with staff;
- ability to conduct meetings with a range of current and former groups of students;
- ability to write succinctly and coherently;
- ability to meet exacting timescales and deadlines;
- ability to work effectively as a member of a team.

Recruitment, training and role of review coordinators

15 Review coordinators are also recruited from individuals nominated by institutions or other organisations, and from individuals who reply to advertisements. They may be seconded from institutions or independent consultancies. All must possess extensive experience of HE and of the assurance of standards and quality. They will be expected to perform a number of duties, of which managing reviews and writing reports are the major responsibilities. Opportunities to contribute to other activities such as editing reports, training subject specialist reviewers and producing subject overview reports may also be available.

16 Because of the relative complexity of the review coordinator role, the individuals recruited will undergo a longer induction and training process than that provided for subject specialist reviewers. Induction into the review method will include attendance at, and participation in, at least one subject specialist reviewer training course, as well as attendance at workshops and conferences arranged by the Agency. The Agency will pay all travel and subsistence expenses incurred by review coordinators during induction and training, in line with the Agency's published arrangements. Fees will also be paid for review coordinator induction and training.

17 Review coordinators should normally be available to manage up to eight reviews per year. Reviews take place throughout the academic year and are variable in length. Review coordinators will need to organise their time, and to reach agreement with their teams of reviewers, about the pattern of review activities in such a way as to ensure effective use of the time available.

18 All subject reviews consist of four main activities:

- preparation for subject review;
- visits to the subject provider;
- analysis of documentary evidence;
- report writing.

The review coordinator is responsible for maintaining an overview of the range and balance of these activities, and for helping the subject specialist reviewers to apportion their time effectively. The achievement of an appropriate balance between the various activities requires planning in advance of, and coordination throughout, the review; above all, it must enable the team to develop a robust evidence base on which to make judgements.

Knowledge and skills required of review coordinators

19 In order to carry out their role, review coordinators will need to demonstrate:

Knowledge and understanding of HE

- recent knowledge and understanding of current issues;
- awareness of current teaching methods and curricula;
- knowledge and understanding of the assurance of standards and quality;
- experience of liaison with senior management and staff at other levels;

Skills

- ability to manage small teams (with experience either in HE or in industry);
- ability to work within tight timescales and to strict deadlines;
- ability to lead a team of experts;
- ability to communicate effectively in face-to-face interaction;
- ability to produce clear and succinct reports to time;
- experience of word processing.

20 The essential qualities outlined above might be reinforced by experience of a wide range of teaching in HE and by experience of programme accreditation by professional or statutory bodies, programme approval or validation events, quality audits, quality assessment/subject review or educational inspection.

Recruitment, training and role of institutional reviewers

21 Institutional reviewers are selected both from applicants nominated by institutions and from self-nominees.

22 Reviewers are appointed for a period of three years, and may be invited to continue for a further period. During the period of appointment, reviewers may be asked to undertake up to nine review activities. No reviewer will be expected to undertake more than three activities in any year, but the Agency cannot guarantee to offer a particular number of reviews during a three-year appointment.

23 A training programme is provided by the Agency, which includes an opportunity to observe part of a review in progress. The Agency will pay all travel and subsistence expenses incurred by reviewers, in line with its published travel and subsistence arrangements. It will not pay fees to reviewers for attendance at training programmes.

24 The responsibilities of reviewers include:

- reading and analysing self-evaluations prepared by institutions and any other documentation sent in advance of reviews;
- participating in briefing meetings;
- participating in visits to institutions in order to gather, share, test and verify evidence;
- making judgements on institutions' management of academic standards and quality;
- contributing to and commenting on compilation of the review report;
- attending reviewers' briefing and training meetings.

Knowledge and skills required of institutional reviewers

25 Selection is undertaken by the Agency with the intention of ensuring that reviewers:

- are knowledgeable about HE institutions;
- have wide experience of academic management and quality assurance;
- can readily assimilate a large amount of disparate information;
- can analyse and make reliable judgements about complex arrangements;
- can hold discussions at a high level about strategic and operational approaches;
- have personal credibility with senior managers and heads of HE institutions.

Institutional review secretaries

26 Some reviews will require particular administrative support, which may be provided by a review secretary. A typical review secretary is an institutional administrator with at least three years' experience of academic administration, including committee support. Nominations of persons willing to act as review secretaries are invited, from time to time, from heads of administration in higher education institutions. Supporting a review activity as secretary is often seen as a valuable staff development opportunity.

ANNEX B Initial profiles

Constructing a profile

1 The institutional review element of academic review, together with the cumulative results of subject review, will supply the information about institutional systems of quality assurance needed to discuss, and to secure agreements about, appropriate intensity of scrutiny of subject review. Where there has not yet been an institutional review within the integrated method, the Agency will use existing information to construct initial profiles for use as a starting point in discussions with institutions.

2 The Agency will prepare a 2,000-word profile of each HE institution, based on an analysis of information contained in academic audit reports, collaborative audit reports and subject review/teaching quality assessment reports. In the case of institutions, such as FE institutions, for which quality audit reports are not available, profiles will not be produced, and discussions about intensity of scrutiny will be based primarily on the previous subject review/teaching quality assessment report.

3 To construct a profile, the Agency will:

- review audit and collaborative audit reports (if available) for an institution to prepare an introduction to the profile summarising institutional background, general features and mission. Particular attention will be paid to the listings of strengths and weaknesses that have been a feature of the concluding sections of audit reports published since 1995. A summary of up to 500 words, in which general features and mission are described, will be prepared;
- review quality assessment and subject review summary data in order to identify particular features, obvious strengths and weaknesses, and overall trends across as wide a variety of subjects as possible. A summary of up to 250 words will identify particular institutional features and summarise overall results;
- review subject reports from 1995 on, in order to identify strengths and weaknesses reported by subject specialist reviewers. A summary of up to 1,250 words will evaluate evidence related to:
 - a the curricula, their design and content;
 - b student learning, assessment and student achievement, including progression to further study and to employment;
 - c teaching and learning;
 - d student progression, including academic support;
 - e learning resources, including staffing.

Using a profile

4 'Scope and preference' surveys will be used to determine the range and the complexity of subjects offered by individual institutions. When these have been completed, the Agency will initiate discussions with institutions in order to agree the intensity of scrutiny likely to be required for each subject review.

5 Initial profiles will be shared with the institution concerned but will not be published more widely. The information on which they are based will be of differing age; this will be borne in mind when constructing the profiles and entering discussions with institutions about intensity of review.

6 Each subject review will be considered separately for the purposes of determining the intensity of scrutiny. Regard will be had both to specific information about the subject provision and to the overall record of management of quality and standards by the institution. Strengths and weaknesses of the subject provision will be identified in order to guide review teams towards those matters on which they might concentrate during review. Reviewers will be able to use previous subject reports to help them in this respect but must take into account the currency of the information available and the perception of an institution about its own strengths and weaknesses. In the absence of agreement on the intensity of review that is appropriate, the decision of the Agency will be final.

7 Discussions about intensity of scrutiny will provide an opportunity for institutions to draw attention to changes which have taken place since the last review of a subject and, in particular, steps which may have been taken to address any shortcomings identified. The outcome of the discussions should be agreement on areas that should receive particular attention during the course of reviews, and areas where it appears that greater reliance could be placed on indirect evidence.

8 The initial agreement reached will be reviewed after analysis of the self-evaluation by reviewers and again, if necessary, during the review itself. If a team of reviewers considers that it requires more or less time than agreed, the matter will be referred to the Agency and discussed with the institution.

ANNEX C Guidelines for producing self-evaluation documents for subject review

Introduction

1 A self-evaluation document is a statement which demonstrates that a subject provider has evaluated the following, in a constructively self-critical manner:

- appropriateness of the academic standards it has set for its programmes;
- effectiveness of the curriculum in delivering the intended outcomes of the programmes;
- effectiveness of assessment in measuring attainment of the intended outcomes;
- extent to which the intended standards and outcomes are achieved by students; and
- quality of the learning opportunities provided for students.

2 A self-evaluation should discuss both strengths and weaknesses of provision, as perceived by the provider. The document is an opportunity for the provider to demonstrate how the strengths of the provision identified in previous subject reviews or accreditation events have been built upon, and how any weaknesses identified have been addressed. Where weaknesses remain, plans for addressing these should be summarised. Reviewers will give credit for appropriate remedial plans that address effectively any acknowledged weaknesses.

3 These guidelines have been prepared to help institutions prepare self-evaluation documents. They are neither prescriptive, nor exhaustive. Academic reviewers will use self-evaluation documents in any reasonable form, provided they contain the information that reviewers need to plan and conduct the review.

4 Academic review involves testing and verifying statements made in self-evaluation documents, thereby arriving at judgements on standards and quality. This process places the self-evaluation document at the centre of the review. A high quality, reflective document that draws upon robust internal review procedures is likely to lead to a review that places a minimum burden on the institution. An inadequate document that is poorly organised and which is descriptive rather than evaluative, will leave reviewers needing to gather for themselves a far greater proportion of the evidence they will require to make their judgements, resulting in a review that may prove more burdensome to the institution.

5 Self-evaluation documents should commence with a short statement of the range of the provision being reviewed. Programme specifications (see Annex D) should be appended. Factual material provided in the programme specifications need not be repeated in the document.

6 A flexible approach should be taken to preparing and presenting self-evaluation documents to accommodate the range and potential complexity of subject provision. For example, some subjects may well contain very large numbers of programmes; some 'programmes' may comprise complex modular schemes; some subjects may be aggregated for review purposes.

7 Where large numbers of programmes are included under a subject heading, or where a subject category contains more than one discrete discipline, it may be sensible to evaluate discrete programmes or groups of related programmes separately. Where this is done, the broad structure indicated below should still be used, but the self-evaluations should be presented as a coherent package. Thus, in a subject such as engineering, with a number of discrete sub-disciplines, an institution may wish to present separate self-evaluations of each discipline, introduced by a short overview dealing with the institution's approach to the subject as a whole.

8 Where subject provision is offered within a wider multi-disciplinary framework, general information about the framework and the main pathways within any modular structure, should be included in an annex to the self-evaluation. An institution may choose to nominate a group of subjects to be reviewed together if they are linked through options or pathways available within a modular structure. In this case, an introductory overview of the approach to the provision as a whole may be appropriate.

9 Self-evaluation documents should be structured to address:

A Overall aims of the subject provision

B Evaluation of the subject provision:

- i learning outcomes;
- ii curricula and assessment;
- iii quality of learning opportunities;
- iv maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality;

and should have annexed:

C Factual information about the subject provision:

- i a programme specification for each programme in the subject(s) under review; and
- ii any information about relevant modular structures or collaborative arrangements.

10 When drafting self-evaluation documents, institutions may find it helpful to refer to:

- the precepts in those sections of the *Code of practice* relating directly to quality and standards; and
- the prompts and questions for academic reviewers in the *aide-mémoire* in Annex E.

Overall aims of the subject provision

11 There must be a clear statement of the overall aims of the subject provision. This will be used by reviewers to assess whether provision achieves its broad purposes. The statement of aims will be reproduced at the start of the subject review report. Overall aims will reflect the distinctive mission of the institution, and might place study of a discipline in contexts such as:

- enabling students to develop their capacity to learn;
- meeting international, national, regional or local needs;
- preparing students for employment or for further study;
- widening access to higher education.

12 Statements of aims should be succinct but should convey clearly the parameters of the subject provision. They may be presented as narrative statements, bullet points, or as a mixture of the two. They should not exceed 500 words in length.

Evaluation of the subject provision

13 The evaluation should indicate where the supporting evidence may be found, eg within other institutional documentation. Such references will help the reviewers in gathering evidence, and avoid the need for merely descriptive material to be included in an evaluative document.

Learning outcomes

14 The first part of the evaluation should address the appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes in relation to the overall aims of the provision, relevant subject benchmark statements, and other external reference points. The evaluation should discuss the effectiveness of measures to ensure that staff and students have a clear understanding of the aims and intended outcomes of programmes.

Curricula and assessment

15 The evaluation should review the effectiveness of the content and design of the curricula in enabling the intended outcomes of programmes to be achieved. Specific issues that are likely to be pursued by reviewers include:

- academic and intellectual progression within the curriculum;
- appropriateness of content in relation to the level of the award;
- inclusion of recent developments in the subject;
- reflection of best practice in pedagogy.

16 The evaluation should review the effectiveness of student assessment in measuring achievement of the intended outcomes of programmes. Reviewers are likely to be interested in the effectiveness of assessment in:

- enabling students to demonstrate achievement;
- discriminating between different categories of performance;
- promoting student learning (especially through formative assessment).

Quality of learning opportunities

17 The evaluation should review the effectiveness of **teaching and learning**, in relation to programme aims and curriculum content. Reviewers are likely to be interested in:

- range and appropriateness of teaching methods employed;
- ways in which participation by students is encouraged;
- quality of learning materials provided;
- strategies for staff development to enhance teaching performance;
- effectiveness of team teaching;
- student workloads.

18 The evaluation should review **student progression**. The effectiveness of strategies of academic support, and the extent to which they take account of the ability profile of the student intake in relation to the aims of the programmes, should be discussed. Reviewers are likely to be interested in:

- recruitment and induction of students;
- identification of and action on any special learning needs;
- feedback to students on their progress;
- overall academic guidance and supervision;
- tutorial support.

19 The evaluation should review the adequacy of **learning resources** and the effectiveness of their utilisation. In particular, the evaluation should demonstrate a strategic approach to linking resources to intended programme outcomes. Reviewers will be interested not only in physical resources, but also in the effective use of human resources through such things as induction, mentoring and development of staff. Evaluation of action taken to prepare for or build on accreditation as an Investor in People could be relevant.

Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

20 There should be an evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures taken to maintain and enhance the quality and standards of provision. Reviewers will be particularly interested in the effectiveness of evaluation and use of quantitative data and qualitative feedback in a strategy of enhancement and continuous improvement.

21 Quantitative data might include:

- statistics on student achievement in all forms of summative assessment;
- degree classifications;
- entry qualifications;
- progression and completion rates;
- first employment destinations.

22 Qualitative feedback might include:

- student feedback;
- staff feedback;
- external examiners' reports;
- employers' views on graduates they have recruited;
- accreditation and monitoring reports by professional or statutory bodies;
- previous subject reviews;
- comments from internal re-validation.

23 The evaluation of the subject provision should not exceed 6,000 words in length.

Annexes

24 A programme specification for each programme covered by the review should be annexed. Separate programme specifications are not required for every possible pathway within a modular structure. For joint honours, or similar combined studies programmes, a short statement of the rationale for the combination should accompany the programme specifications for each subject.

25 Where appropriate, brief factual explanations may also be provided of:

- curricular structures, options and pathways provided in the subject(s) being reviewed, including details of any applicable modular scheme;
- any relationship with a collaborating institution, for example if a programme is provided jointly, or is franchised.

Each explanation should not exceed 500 words in length.

ANNEX D Programme specifications

What are programme specifications?

1 In a programme specification a teaching team sets out clearly and concisely:

- the intended learning outcomes of the programme;
- the teaching and learning methods that enable learners to achieve these outcomes and the assessment methods used to demonstrate their achievement;
- the relationship of the programme and its study elements to the qualifications framework.

2 Programme specifications provide information to a range of stakeholders, including students, prospective students and employers. They also promote a professional dialogue within teaching teams and subject communities about how these outcomes are represented in academic standards and how teaching and assessment strategies enable outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated.

3 Programme specifications use the term 'outcomes' to explain learning intentions rather than the more traditional use of 'aims and objectives' because the concept of an outcome is more closely linked to the learning and assessment process.

Outcomes-based learning

4 Reduced to its simplest form, an outcomes-based approach to learning has three components:

- an explicit statement of learning intent expressed as outcomes that reflect aims and values;
- the process to enable the outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated (curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment and support methods);
- the criteria for judging achievement of the intended outcomes.

5 Programme specifications encourage academic staff to identify the outcomes from their programmes and present these as concise statements of what a *typical learner* will have learnt if s/he has satisfied the requirements for an award. The process of creating a programme specification also encourages academic staff to think critically about the way the outcomes are achieved. This requires careful and systematic analysis of the curriculum, teaching and assessment methods.

6 Programme specifications cannot by themselves explain the standards (of achievement or performance) that students will reach collectively or individually at different stages of a programme. Some of the ways in which performance or attainment can be conveyed include:

- level descriptors that describe the characteristics of learning expected at each stage of programme;
- general and specific assessment criteria that discriminate between differing achievement when student work is assessed;
- examples of assessed student work that embody the standards of learning being sought;
- transcripts that provide a summary record of learning and achievement;
- personal learning records created and maintained by students and providing evidence of, and commentary on, their own learning and achievement.

What do programme specifications describe?

7 In constructing programme specifications an assumption is made that a set of outcomes can be identified for any curriculum or learning experience. The more opportunities there are for choice within the curriculum the more difficult it may be to define the knowledge-based outcomes. However, other types of outcome are likely to be generic to a subject field regardless of what is actually studied.

8 Where a programme has been designed to integrate two or more subjects, with intended outcomes that reflect the integrated nature of study, a separate specification of the integrated programme is appropriate. Where subject elements are combined, as in a joint honours programme, a separate full programme specification may not be needed; but there should be a short statement of the rationale for the combination.

Information content and format

9 All programme specifications should include a set of core information that makes explicit the intended outcomes, in terms of knowledge and understanding, skills, and other attributes. Programme specifications may include further information about, for example, learning support.

10 Institutions can create programme specifications in either template or open text format. A series of templates to aid construction is available on the Agency's web site.

Determining the outcomes

11 Determining the outcomes for a programme is an important institutional responsibility, but there are a number of sources of information that curriculum designers should refer to when developing outcome statements, such as:

- institutional policies on, for example, the general skills of communication, literacy, numeracy, the use of information technology, team working, career management skills or personal development planning;
- subject benchmark statements that represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in a subject;
- information provided by professional and statutory regulatory bodies on knowledge and skills that must be possessed by those wishing to proceed to a professional qualification;
- information about occupational standards in fields where this is relevant;
- institutional or national level descriptors.

12 Programme specifications should indicate the reference points that have been used in the development of a programme outcome statement.

13 Reviewers will wish to understand how any relevant subject benchmark statements have been used to inform the specification of programmes. However, outcomes for a programme should be determined through a deliberative process by the institution, they should not simply be copied from a subject benchmark statement. Rather, the benchmark statement should act as a point of reference against which the institution's own outcomes and processes can be reviewed and justified. Benchmark statements should promote professional dialogue about the educational outcomes of programmes between those responsible for designing, delivering, assessing and assuring programmes.

14 Ultimately it is the responsibility of institutions and teaching teams to decide and justify which outcomes will be fostered and to determine how such outcomes will be realised and

assessed. The purpose of the programme specification is to make clear these decisions in a publicly accessible way. In areas where there is no relevant subject benchmark statement, other reference points, such as level descriptors for the qualifications framework, and the *Code of practice* on programme approval, monitoring and review, may be found helpful.

Programme specifications and the subject review process

15 Programme specifications should be annexed to an institution's self-evaluation document. In the context of the review process they provide a reference point for evaluation of curriculum design, the methods and strategies used to promote and support learning, and the relationship of programmes and their component units to the national qualifications framework.

16 Programme specifications should provide a concise overview of the programme. They will be underpinned by more detailed information that will be found in curriculum documents, module/unit specifications, staff and student handbooks, and course guides.

17 In time, programme specifications should become embedded in an institution's own curriculum planning, review and validation processes. Institutional documents relating to these processes will provide a good source of information on the deliberative processes that underpin the programme specification.

18 The Agency publishes guidelines on programme specifications, which include examples.

ANNEX E *Aide-mémoire for subject review*

Introduction

1 This *aide-mémoire* consists of questions and prompts to assist academic reviewers. It may be used in:

- analysis of the self-evaluation prior to the review;
- collection of evidence during the review;
- preparation and compilation of the report of the review.

2 The *aide-mémoire* covers the main features of the review process, but it is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. The provider's self-evaluation, the statement of aims, and the intended outcomes of programmes may all raise issues peculiar to the provision under scrutiny.

3 Specific prompts for reviewers are set out under a series of headings. The process of review focuses on the setting of academic standards by the subject provider, their achievement by students, and the quality of the learning opportunities offered. Neither 'standards' nor 'quality' can be reviewed in isolation. They are inter-related and must be reviewed as such. The *aide-mémoire* provides questions and prompts about:

- aims and outcomes;
- curricula;
- assessment;
- enhancement;
- teaching and learning;
- student progression;
- learning resources.

4 The *aide-mémoire* should be read in conjunction with paragraphs 68 to 95 of the *Handbook*.

Subject review of standards and quality

5 The subject review process:

- accommodates a wide diversity of institutional mission and approaches to subjects;
- reflects the core academic processes of design, delivery, support, assessment and review of programmes of study;
- articulates with an institution's internal processes for the regulation of academic quality and standards.

6 Key points of reference for reviewers will include the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, the qualifications framework, relevant subject benchmark statements, and the overall aims of the subject provider. Regard should also be had to the requirements of professional and statutory bodies in respect of programmes that they accredit.

7 The *aide-mémoire* is divided into seven sections (i-vii) that help to set the parameters for the review as a whole. Each section comprises:

- a set of questions, to gather information;
- the key issues for evaluation;
- an indication of likely sources of information;
- an indication of the types of activity likely to be undertaken during a review;
- the judgements that should be made.

Section i Aims and outcomes

Evaluation of the intended learning outcomes in relation to external reference points and to the broad aims of the provision

8 Reviewers should ask:

- *What are the intended learning outcomes for a programme?*
- *How do they relate to external reference points including relevant subject benchmark statements, the qualifications framework and any professional body requirements?*
- *How do they relate to the overall aims of the provision as stated by the subject provider?*
- *Are they appropriate to the aims?*

They should then evaluate the intended learning outcomes against relevant external reference points and against the aims of the provision as described in the self-evaluation.

Potential sources of information will include the self-evaluation (and its appended programme specifications), curricular documents, subject benchmark statements, and details of professional body requirements.

Review activities may include an analysis of programme content and benchmark statements, discussions with members of the teaching staff, and discussions with external examiners.

9 As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to judge:

- whether the intended learning outcomes are clearly stated;
- whether they reflect appropriately relevant benchmark statements, other external references, and the overall aims of the provision.

The means by which the subject provider designs curricula that permit achievement of the intended outcomes

10 Reviewers should ask:

- *How does the provider ensure that curriculum content enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes?*
- *How does the provider ensure that the design and organisation of the curriculum is effective in promoting student learning and achievement of the intended learning outcomes?*

They should then evaluate the effectiveness of the way in which the subject provider plans, designs and approves the curricula.

Sources of information will include institutional curricular documents and curricular review and validation reports. Reviewers should seek to extract information about levels and modes of study, breadth and depth of study, inter- and multi-disciplinarity, coherence, flexibility and student choice, as well as the role of professional and/or statutory bodies where relevant.

Review activities will include discussions with members of the teaching teams, support staff and administrative staff, and discussions with students.

The section of the *Code of practice* dealing with programme approval, monitoring and review will provide an important point of reference.

11 As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to judge the adequacy of procedures for ensuring that programmes are designed to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

The means by which the intended outcomes are communicated to students, staff and external examiners

12 Reviewers should ask:

- *How are the intended outcomes of a programme and its constituent parts communicated to staff, students and external examiners?*
- *Do the students know what is expected of them?*

They should then evaluate the way in which subject providers convey their expectations to staff, students and external examiners.

Sources of information will include programme or subject handbooks and curricular documents such as module or unit guides.

Review activities will include discussions with teaching teams, students and external examiners.

The main outcomes should be judgements on the adequacy of arrangements within the subject for communicating intended learning outcomes.

Section ii Curricula

Evaluation of the means by which the subject provider creates the conditions for achievement of the intended learning outcomes

13 Reviewers should ask:

- *Do the design and content of the curricula encourage achievement of the intended learning outcomes in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, subject specific skills (including practical/professional skills), transferable skills, progression to employment and/or further study, and personal development?*

They should then evaluate the design and content of the curriculum for each programme in relation to its potential for enabling students to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Sources of information will include subject or programme handbooks and curricular documents, such as module or unit guides, practical or placement handbooks, and further study and employment statistics.

Review activities will include evaluation of curricular documents and discussions with staff and students.

As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to judge whether the intended learning outcomes are adequately supported by the curricula.

14 Reviewers should ask:

- *Is there evidence that curricular content and design is informed by recent developments in techniques of teaching and learning, by current research and scholarship, and by any changes in relevant occupational or professional requirements?*

They should then evaluate whether the curriculum is adequately informed by such developments.

Sources of information will include subject or programme handbooks, validation or re-validation documents, and professional and/or statutory body accreditation reports.

Review activities will include discussions with staff and external examiners, discussions with professional and/or statutory bodies, and discussions with employers (where relevant and possible).

As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to assess the currency of the curricula.

Section iii Assessment

Evaluation of the assessment process and the standard it demonstrates

15 Reviewers should ask:

- *Does the assessment process enable learners to demonstrate achievement of the intended outcomes?*
- *Are there criteria that enable internal and external examiners to distinguish between different categories of achievement?*
- *Can there be full confidence in the security and integrity of assessment procedures?*
- *Does the assessment strategy have an adequate formative function in developing student abilities?*

They should then evaluate whether the overall assessment process and the particular assessment instruments chosen are appropriate and effective.

Sources of information will include assessment criteria and guidance to markers, external examiners' reports and procedures for monitoring and recording achievement.

Review activities will include discussions with teaching teams, students and external examiners and the analysis of the methods for recording progress and achievement.

The sections of the *Code of practice* dealing with assessment of students and external examining will be important points of reference.

As a result of these activities, reviewers should be able to judge whether assessment processes can adequately measure achievement of the intended programme outcomes.

16 Reviewers should ask:

- *What evidence is there that the standards achieved by learners meet the minimum expectations for the award, as measured against relevant subject benchmarks and the qualifications framework?*

They should then evaluate whether student achievement meets such expectations.

Sources of information will include external examiners' reports, examination board minutes, and samples of student work.

Review activities will include discussions with teaching teams and external examiners, and observation of examination boards where possible.

Relevant subject benchmark statements and the level descriptors of the qualifications framework will be important points of reference.

As a result of these activities, reviewers should be able to judge whether appropriate standards are being achieved.

Section iv Enhancement

Evaluation of the institution's approaches to reviewing and improving the standards achieved

17 Reviewers should ask:

- *How does the subject provider review and seek to enhance standards?*

They should then evaluate the adequacy of the processes used.

Sources of information will include internal and external review documents, external examiners' reports, professional and/or statutory body accreditation reports, and examination board minutes.

Review activities will include analyses of information, practices and procedures, discussions with teaching teams and discussions with external examiners.

As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to assess the capacity of the subject provider to review and calibrate their standards, and to promote enhancement.

Section v Teaching and learning

Evaluation of the quality of the learning opportunities offered by the subject provider: the teaching delivered by staff and how it leads to learning by students

18 *Reviewers should ask:*

- *How effective is teaching in relation to curriculum content and programme aims?*
- *How effectively do staff draw upon their research, scholarship or professional activity to inform their teaching?*
- *How good are the materials provided to support learning?*
- *Is there effective engagement with and participation by students?*
- *Is the quality of teaching maintained and enhanced through effective staff development, peer review of teaching, integration of part-time and visiting staff, effective team teaching and induction and mentoring of new staff?*
- *How effectively is learning facilitated in terms of student workloads?*

They should then evaluate the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning activities; in particular:

- *the breadth, depth, pace and challenge of teaching;*
- *whether there is suitable variety of teaching methods;*
- *the effectiveness of the teaching of subject knowledge; and*
- *the effectiveness of the teaching of subject specific, transferable and practical skills.*

Sources of information will include student questionnaires, internal review documents, staff development documents, subject or programme handbooks, and academic staff appointment documents.

Review activities will include direct observation of teaching (where judged to be necessary by reviewers), discussions with staff, and discussions with students.

As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to make an overall judgement of the extent to which teaching and learning contributes to the achievement of the intended outcomes.

Section vi Student progression

Evaluation of the quality of the learning opportunities offered by the subject provider: student progression and academic support

19 *Reviewers should ask:*

- *Is there an appropriate overall strategy for academic support, including written guidance, which is consistent with the student profile and the overall aims of the provision?*
- *Are there effective arrangements for admission and induction which are generally understood by staff and applicants?*
- *How effectively is learning facilitated by academic guidance, feedback and supervisory arrangements?*

- *Are the arrangements for academic tutorial support clear and generally understood by staff and students?*

They should then evaluate whether the arrangements in place are effective in facilitating student progression towards successful completion of their programmes.

Sources of information will include subject or programme handbooks, student questionnaires, internal review documents, recruitment data, and progression data.

Review activities will include discussions with admissions staff, discussions with teaching staff, and discussions with students.

As a result of these activities, reviewers should be able to judge the effectiveness of the recruitment arrangements, the strategy for student support and the progression of students.

Section vii Learning resources

Evaluation of the quality of the learning opportunities offered by the subject provider: learning resources and their deployment

20 *Reviewers should ask:*

- *Is the collective expertise of the academic staff suitable and available for effective delivery of the curricula, for the overall teaching, learning and assessment strategy, and for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes?*
- *Are appropriate staff development opportunities available?*
- *Is appropriate technical and administrative support available?*

They should then evaluate the effectiveness of the deployment of academic and support staff in support of the intended learning outcomes.

Sources of information will include staff CVs, internal review documents, external examiners' reports, and staff development documents.

Review activities may include direct observation of teaching (where carried out), discussions with teaching teams, and discussions with students.

As a result of these activities reviewers should be able to judge whether there are appropriately qualified staff who are contributing effectively to achievement of the intended outcomes.

21 *Reviewers should ask:*

- *Is there an overall strategy for the deployment of learning resources?*
- *How effectively is learning facilitated in terms of the provision of resources?*
- *Is suitable teaching and learning accommodation available?*
- *Are the subject book and periodical stocks appropriate and accessible?*
- *Are suitable equipment and appropriate IT facilities available to learners?*

They should then evaluate the appropriateness of the learning resources available, and the effectiveness of their deployment.

Sources of information will include equipment lists, library stocks, and internal review documents.

Review activities will include direct observation of accommodation and equipment, discussions with staff, and discussions with students.

As a result of these activities, reviewers should be able to judge how effectively the learning resources are deployed in support of the intended outcomes.

ANNEX F Subject review facilitator

Introduction

1 Each institution may nominate a member or members of staff (normally no more than three) to take on the role of facilitator, although there is no requirement to do so. The purpose of this is to provide effective liaison between the team of reviewers and the subject staff and to ensure that the team obtains accurate and comprehensive information about the educational provision and its institutional context. In due course, the experience gained by the facilitators in dealing with reviews in several departments should enable them to help subject providers prepare for review, disseminate good practice within the institution, and highlight areas for improvement identified by each review. Facilitators will be briefed for their role by the Agency.

2 Institutional staff who wish to act as facilitators should possess:

- thorough knowledge of the structure, policies, priorities, procedures and practices of their institution;
- extensive knowledge and experience of working in HE at a senior level;
- extensive experience of quality assurance procedures;
- knowledge and understanding of the Agency's review method;
- qualifications and experience in a subject area other than that being reviewed;
- an ability to maintain confidentiality.

It is also preferable that facilitators have either direct experience of teaching in HE or experience as a senior administrator in an HE institution.

3 If no facilitator is nominated by the institution, the liaison functions described in this annex will normally be taken on by a designated member of staff from the academic department under review.

Role of the facilitator

General matters

4 Organisation and management of the review is the responsibility of the review coordinator. Responsibility for ensuring that the review team is provided with appropriate evidence to allow it to reach its judgements lies primarily with the subject provider. The facilitator's role is to ensure that the channels of communication between the two work effectively. Discussions between the facilitator and review coordinator should ensure that the subject provider is aware of issues being addressed by the teams and the evidence needed to clarify them. It would be helpful if HE institutions could supply review coordinators with brief outlines of facilitators' previous experience and current institutional roles.

5 Throughout the course of a review, the facilitator helps the reviewers to come to a clear and accurate understanding of the structures, policies, priorities and procedures of the institution, and the nature of the provision under scrutiny. S/he may wish to bring additional information to the attention of the team and may seek to correct factual inaccuracy. It is for the reviewers however to decide how best to use the information provided. The facilitator is not a member of the team and will not make judgements about the provision.

6 The role requires the facilitator to observe objectively, to communicate clearly with the team and the subject provider, to respect the protocols on confidentiality outlined below, and to establish effective relationships with the review coordinator and the team, as well as with the

subject staff. Facilitators should refrain from acting as advocates for the subject provision under review. However, they may legitimately:

- assist the institution in understanding issues of concern to reviewers;
- respond to requests for information and comment;
- draw the review team's attention to matters that may have been overlooked;
- identify the location of evidence;
- provide advice on institutional matters.

Activities preceding reviews

7 Institutions may find it helpful to involve facilitators fully in preparation for a subject review, including the initial meeting with the Agency to discuss the intensity of review. The facilitator with responsibility for a review should receive copies of all correspondence between the Agency and the institution, and should either attend the initial team meeting or be briefed about it by the review coordinator.

Activities during reviews

8 The extended pattern of review requires facilitators to fulfil three main functions in addition to the general liaison role outlined above. First, they should monitor the pattern of visits by academic reviewers. If it appears that there is a departure from the agreed pattern, the matter should be discussed immediately with the review coordinator.

9 Second, the facilitator should maintain regular telephone and/or email contact with the review coordinator to ensure that reviewers are receiving the information or documentation that they need, particularly for off-site analysis.

10 Third, facilitators may attend all the following:

- team meetings, except those in which judgements are being discussed by the team of reviewers;
- formal meetings held between the reviewers and the institution to investigate matters specific to standards and quality, except those with current and former students;
- 'progress' meetings held between the review coordinator and subject staff.

Confidentiality

11 Facilitators will observe the same conventions of confidentiality as subject specialist reviewers. In particular, no information gained during a review shall be used in a manner that allows individuals to be identified. Facilitators must exercise care when reporting back to subject staff to maintain the confidentiality of written material produced by reviewers for the initial team meeting, or at other times during the review. However, facilitators may make their own notes on team discussions in order to help subject staff understand the issues being addressed by reviewers. This can improve the effectiveness of a review, and contribute to the enhancement of standards and quality within the institution.

ANNEX G Subject review teams

Team composition

1 Each review team reflects the nature and scope of the provision in the subject to be reviewed, with regard to the nature of the institution. The number of academic reviewers in each team reflects the size, range and complexity of the education provided. As far as possible, the Agency matches the collective expertise of the team with the broad specialisms of the subject provision. Using its register of reviewers and the criteria for composing teams outlined below, the Agency will propose a subject review team to an institution before the review starts. Account is taken of conflicts of interest declared by academic reviewers. If a review is combined with activity of a professional or statutory body, the requirements of that body will also be considered.

2 Institutions are invited to comment on the composition of teams and to confirm their agreement in writing to the Agency within four weeks of notification. Any concerns about the suitability of reviewers should be discussed with Agency officers as soon as possible after notification and, if not resolved satisfactorily, put in writing to the Agency.

3 The main criterion used by the Agency for determining the number of reviewers required for a particular team is the size of the provision described in the 'scope and preference' returns provided by institutions. Accordingly, as an approximate guide, review teams will comprise:

- three subject specialists and a review coordinator for all provision of between 30 and 250 FTE students;
- four subject specialists and a review coordinator for 250-500 FTE students;
- five subject specialists and a review coordinator for 500-1,000 FTE students;
- six subject specialists and a review coordinator for 1,000+ FTE students.

4 Teams will not normally have fewer than three specialist reviewers. Very large and/or complex reviews may require more reviewers than shown above.

Team function for subject review

General matters

5 Subject specialist reviewers focus their attention on the subject and only address institutional matters when they have a direct bearing on the student learning process. It is, however, important that review coordinators ensure that matters related to institutional function which come to their team's attention are reported, thereby making them available to the reviewers who carry out institutional review. For example, subject reviewers might collect information relevant to institutional practices on external examining when considering assessment practices in relation to a subject.

6 Subject specialist reviewers assume a collective responsibility for gathering and verifying evidence in relation to academic standards, but may concentrate individually on specific matters in relation to the quality of learning opportunities. All judgements are, however, made collectively. For the benefit of other team members, subject specialists may be asked by the review coordinator to produce brief written commentaries based on the self-evaluation and the evidence gathered during the review. These commentaries should make full reference to the aims of the subject provider and identify matters for which additional evidence is required. They will inform the team's priorities, the balance of activities undertaken and the collective judgements made.

Team meetings

7 At the first meeting of the team consideration will be given to the:

- self-evaluation and any other documentation supplied by the institution prior to the review;
- scope and nature of the provision and identification of the main matters for review and judgement;
- role of the facilitator from the institution in relation to conduct of the review;
- allocation of individual responsibilities among members of the team;
- likely activities, both on- and off-site, required for the review;
- likely pattern of visits to the subject provider.

8 The initial team meeting can take place either at the institution or elsewhere, but it should be followed as soon as feasible by a meeting with the subject provider, at which the team discusses the intended pattern of review with the staff of the institution. The team and the subject provider can then discuss the likely arrangements for visits to the institution and identify any internal quality assurance 'events' which might usefully be observed. The meeting also allows an opportunity for the institutional representatives, if they wish, to make a brief presentation on the provision to be reviewed, and to inform the team of any developments since the self-evaluation was written. If appropriate, student representatives may participate in this meeting.

Team visits

9 The review coordinator must also confirm the intended pattern of the review with the Agency, so that the Agency can monitor whether it complies with the indication already given to the institution about the intensity of scrutiny required to review its provision. If a team of reviewers decides that it needs more or less time for a review than that broadly agreed between the Agency and the institution, the reasons for this must be discussed with the Agency.

10 Reviewers may visit the institution at any time during the academic year of the review, but always by mutual agreement with the subject provider and within the overall number of reviewer days allocated by the Agency. This may involve the team visiting together, as for the initial meeting with the subject provider, or it may involve two or more reviewers visiting for specific observations or meetings. Review teams should not, however, arrange for individual subject specialist reviewers to visit subject providers alone.

11 Each review will include a number of meetings between members of the institution and reviewers to consider the various aspects of provision related to standards and quality. The review coordinator is responsible for ensuring that the team considers the accumulating evidence and comes to conclusions.

12 Telephone or email contacts between the team and the institution may be used to request information or to give notice of issues which the reviewers might wish to explore.

13 All reviewers will be expected to identify, share, consider and evaluate evidence related to the programmes under scrutiny. Reviewers should keep notes of all meetings with staff and students, their observations, and comments on students' work and its assessment. Circulation of these notes within the team will help develop a collective evidence base on which the judgements can be made. Reviewers will be expected to evaluate how the accumulating evidence compares with the evidence provided by the subject provider in the self-evaluation, and to test the strength of the evidence adduced to support the judgements. Discussion of the emerging judgements must involve the whole review team.

14 Draft summaries written by reviewers during the course of a review will focus on the evaluation of evidence related to their particular responsibilities, as agreed by the team at the commencement of the review. Summaries should be analytical rather than descriptive and should refer to sources of information as well as to direct observations. Any written evaluation should summarise the relevant strengths and weaknesses of the provision and, overall, should underpin the judgements made. A final meeting of the reviewers will be used to review any additional evidence, to agree the particular strengths and weaknesses in relation to both standards and quality, to finalise the judgements, and to determine precisely what is to be reported.

Reports

15 The review coordinator produces the first draft of the report immediately after completion of the review, drawing on the self-evaluation and on the summaries prepared by academic reviewers. This draft is then checked by reviewers for factual accuracy and affords an opportunity for further comment before the report is despatched to the institution. As the reports provide the main feedback about reviews to institutions, it is particularly important that teams check their accuracy carefully.

16 The published reports are the main documented outcomes of the subject review process. Publication should take place within 20 weeks from the end of a review. Reports should be characterised by succinct, accurate writing and a clear, consistent style. The evidence base must be sound, and must be recorded accurately by reviewers.

Practical arrangements for subject reviewers

17 Practical arrangements made by the Agency for reviewers include:

- hotel accommodation, where this is required;
- travel and subsistence reimbursement;
- administrative support.

18 Reviewers will need to have access to computer facilities suitable for word processing. Reviewers with personal computers that are compatible with the Agency's equipment may compile and transfer written summaries electronically. Reviewers must conform to procedures described in the IT guidelines supplied to them by the Agency, as these are designed to protect against damage and computer viruses.

ANNEX H Documentation (including student work) for subject review

Institutional documents

1 Apart from the self-evaluation, academic reviewers will not normally expect documents to be prepared especially for review. Subject providers should direct reviewers, in the self-evaluation and/or by means of a separate list, to the availability and relevance of documents which might assist them to test and verify the statements made in the self-evaluation or which are relevant to the judgements they will make.

2 The following documents will be required in advance of the review:

- the self-evaluation, with the programme specifications annexed;
- relevant prospectuses;
- a location map.

3 The availability and relevance of further documentation will be discussed at the initial meeting with the subject provider. As the review progresses, reviewers may ask for further documentation. The following documents will be relevant to the review:

- subject or programme handbooks;
- curricular documents, module or unit guides;
- subject or programme monitoring reports, including those from external sources such as professional and/or statutory bodies, if these are available;
- student questionnaire data;
- external examiners' reports for the previous three years;
- student intake and progression data for the previous three years.

The following documents may also be relevant, but this list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive:

- minutes of relevant meetings, including examination boards;
- equipment lists;
- practical or placement handbooks;
- programme approval, validation and re-validation documents;
- further study and employment statistics (student destinations);
- academic staffing list and short profiles (indicating main teaching and research interests and any administrative responsibilities).

Reviewers will not necessarily ask for copies of documents. They may prefer to read the documents during the course of a visit. Documents can be provided in electronic form by mutual agreement between the subject provider and the review team.

There is no requirement or expectation that documents will be assembled in a 'base room' for the use of reviewers. If reviewers wish to see a document, they will ask for it. Because review takes place over an extended period, immediate availability of every document that might be requested is not necessary.

Student work

4 Reviewers will expect to see a sample of student work. The range and nature of student work to be made available to the reviewers will be discussed at the initial meeting. Reviewers will look at student work to evaluate whether:

- student achievement matches the intended outcomes of the programme(s);

- assessment is designed appropriately to measure achievement of the intended learning outcomes;
- the assessment instruments provide an adequate basis for discriminating between different categories of attainment;
- the actual outcomes of programmes meet the minimum expectations for the award.

Reviewers will not duplicate or 'second-guess' the work of external examiners. As such, reviewers will not normally expect to see work which is currently under consideration by external examiners.

5 Academic reviewers will need to see a broad sample of student work that demonstrates use of the full range of assessment instruments deployed in both formative and summative assessments. To enable them to gain a full understanding of the assessment strategy, reviewers will need to see marking guides or other assessment criteria, and any guidance on providing feedback to students through assessment. They will use external examiners' reports to triangulate with their own observations of work from each level/year of study, samples of work from core modules and specialist options and from a representative range of attainment. Samples of work may include, for example:

- coursework of various types;
- practical, laboratory or workshop notebooks;
- projects and/or dissertations;
- examination scripts.

6 Reviewers should record the evidence derived from such scrutiny of student work using the standard *Student work and assessment pro forma* provided by the Agency for this purpose.

ANNEX I Observation of teaching

General arrangements

1 Arrangements for the review of the teaching carried out by subject providers will vary to reflect the nature and scope of the provision. The circumstances in which direct observation of teaching is likely to be appropriate are set out in paragraph 70 of the *Handbook*. Academic reviewers may not need to make direct observations of teaching where a subject provider can demonstrate that it has evidence of good quality delivery, and where observations of student work indicate student achievement in line with the intended learning outcomes.

2 However effectively a subject provider might define the intended learning outcomes for students and the curricular content suitable for their delivery, if the teaching is poor or if there are restricted learning opportunities, the overall student experience will be poor. Using evidence related to curricular content and indirect evidence related to teaching, such as student feedback and internal peer review, academic reviewers should attempt to evaluate the breadth, depth, pace and challenge of curricular delivery. They should ascertain whether there is a suitable variety of teaching methods, whether intellectual knowledge and skills are transmitted effectively, and whether practical knowledge and skills are imparted in subjects where they are relevant. If sufficient evidence is not available to allow a reliable evaluation to be made, reviewers should use direct observation, carried out according to the protocol below.

Protocol for direct observation of teaching

3 When direct observation of teaching takes place, the reviewer will meet the member of staff responsible for the teaching session before it commences in order to introduce her/himself, to discuss the overall objectives for the session, and to determine how students are intended to benefit from it. Understanding the precise purpose of a teaching session is essential. For example, a lecture delivered for the express purpose of transmitting information will be structured differently from one designed to elicit student participation or stimulate extensive further reading. Reviewers should not make comments during a lecture, seminar or tutorial, and should not be intrusive or engage directly in the activity. For sessions lasting more than one hour, a suitable period of observation may be agreed beforehand. The institution may also make arrangements for the observation of placements and other off-site activities.

4 Whenever academic reviewers observe teaching, a standard *Teaching observation note* should be completed. These are supplied by the Agency. In making judgements about individual teaching sessions, reviewers must provide oral feedback to members of staff, even if this requires a later appointment to be made. Oral feedback is confidential to the member of staff and should be given privately. Its purpose is to offer constructive comment rather than to prescribe preferred practice. Reviewers must also preserve the anonymity of the staff observed teaching in all written reports and in discussions with other staff of the institution.

5 On occasion, students engaged in learning activities in practical sessions or during independent learning sessions may be asked by reviewers to talk about their learning experiences and how the activity being observed fits into their wider programme of study. As with other observations, reviewers should endeavour to meet with the relevant member of staff to ascertain the intended learning outcomes of the session and should provide feedback wherever possible. It is also important that reviewers seek agreement from the member of staff in relation to their discussions with students.

Judgements

6 All judgements by reviewers about the quality of teaching and learning opportunities offered to students should be made against the broad aims of the subject provider and the intended learning outcomes set to bring about achievement of those aims.

ANNEX J | Agenda for meeting with students

Introduction

- 1 Meetings with students enable reviewers to establish student views on the issues being considered. These meetings provide an opportunity not only to hear the direct views of those present, but also to establish more generally whether there are effective arrangements for student feedback and representation.
- 2 The meeting is normally chaired by the review coordinator, who will introduce the subject specialist reviewers and provide a brief summary of the review method. S/he will outline the purpose of the meeting and will emphasise the importance of transparency of the review process. The dialogue with students will normally start with a question to establish on what basis the students were selected to attend the meeting.
- 3 The subject review facilitator should not attend this meeting. Throughout the meeting, students should be given opportunities to raise points not covered by the agenda.

General matters in relation to quality and standards

- How are student views sought?
- Are students represented on committees? If so, what is their role?
- Are student views influential? Can they provide examples?
- Did students make a contribution to the self-evaluation?

The curriculum and intended learning outcomes

- Are students made aware of the intended learning outcomes by programme specifications or other means?
- What is the match between the expectations of students, the intended learning outcomes and the curricular content?
- Does the curricular content encourage the development of knowledge and skills?
- What is its relevance to further study and prospective employment?
- Are timetables and workloads appropriate?
- What opportunities are there for practical and vocational experience?

Assessment and achievement

- Do students understand the criteria for assessment and the methods employed?
- Is assessment formative as well as summative?
- What feedback is there? Is it prompt and effective?
- In their experience, have the intended learning outcomes been achieved?
- Do academic staff discuss student achievement with students?
- Are further study and career aspirations likely to be satisfied?

Teaching and learning

- Is the range of teaching and learning methods appropriate for delivering the curriculum?
- How do students perceive the quality of the teaching?
- Is there effective support and guidance for independent study?

Student progression and support

- What admission and induction procedures are in operation?
- What are the arrangements for academic support?
- Do these arrangements extend to work experience, placements, study abroad and other off-site experiences?
- What skills are acquired? Do they enhance employability?
- Do students receive effective support?

Learning resources and their deployment

- How good are the library services in terms of opening hours, access, user support, availability of books and journals?
- What IT support is there? Are opening hours, access, user support and availability of work stations and software appropriate?
- Are there suitable programme-specific materials?
- Are the accommodation and equipment adequate?

ANNEX K Schedule for subject review 2000-2006

| Subject | Period during which subject will be reviewed |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Librarianship & Information Management* | 2000-2003 |
| Economics* | 2000-2003 |
| Politics & International Relations* | 2000-2003 |
| Classics & Ancient History* | 2000-2003 |
| Archaeology* | 2000-2003 |
| Philosophy* | 2000-2003 |
| Theology & Religious Studies* | 2000-2003 |
| Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism* | 2000-2003 |
| Business & Management Studies* | 2000-2003 |
| Education Studies* | 2000-2003 |
| Social Policy & Administration & Social Work | 2000-2003 |
| Sociology & Anthropology | 2000-2003 |
| English | 2000-2003 |
| Engineering | 2000-2003 |
| Geography | 2000-2003 |
| Earth, Environmental Sciences & Environmental Studies | 2000-2003 |
| Architecture, Architectural Technology & Landscape Architecture | 2000-2003 |
| Computing | 2000-2003 |
| Law | 2000-2003 |
| Accountancy | 2000-2003 |
| History | 2000-2003 |
| Medicine | 2003-2006 |
| Dentistry | 2003-2006 |
| Veterinary Medicine | 2003-2006 |
| Biosciences | 2003-2006 |
| Subjects Allied to Medicine** | 2003-2006 |
| Nursing & Midwifery** | 2003-2006 |
| Physics & Astronomy | 2003-2006 |
| Chemistry | 2003-2006 |
| Psychology | 2003-2006 |
| Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural & Food Sciences | 2003-2006 |
| Materials | 2003-2006 |
| Building & Surveying | 2003-2006 |
| Town & Country Planning | 2003-2006 |
| Mathematics, Statistics & Operational Research | 2003-2006 |
| Linguistics | 2003-2006 |
| Area Studies | 2003-2006 |
| Languages & Related Studies | 2003-2006 |
| Communications, Media, Film & Television Studies | 2003-2006 |
| Art & Design | 2003-2006 |
| Dance, Drama & Performance Arts | 2003-2006 |
| Music | 2003-2006 |

* To be reviewed in England and Northern Ireland during 2000-2001 using the former subject review method.

** Schedule subject to agreement with the NHS and other funding bodies. These subjects may be reviewed earlier in England.

ANNEX L **Guidelines for producing self-evaluation documents for institutional review**

Introduction

1 An institution's self-evaluation is the principal reference document considered by an academic review team undertaking an institutional review. It will be produced once every six years, in preparation for the six-year review. It will not be required for the interim appraisal meeting. The document describes briefly, analyses in some depth, and comments upon, the effectiveness of the way the institution discharges its responsibility for academic standards and quality. The document should refer to the findings of subject reviews and any implications of these for the effectiveness of the institution's overall management of quality and standards. The self-evaluation should also indicate how the institution has responded to the expectations of the precepts contained in the Agency's *Code of practice on the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. Preparation of the self-evaluation should be undertaken in the light of the objectives, outcomes and scope of institutional review, which are summarised in the following three sections.

Purpose of the self-evaluation

2 The Agency's review asks each institution:

- i to demonstrate that it is discharging effectively its responsibility for the standard of all awards granted in its name, and for the quality of the education provided by it to enable students to achieve that standard;
- ii to confirm and demonstrate that the ways in which it assures academic standards and quality reflect the expectations contained in the precepts of the Agency's *Code of practice*.

3 The self-evaluation provides the main opportunity for the institution to set out its considered answers to these questions, and it is largely upon this document that a view of its effectiveness as an awarding body will be based in the first instance. Because of this the institution should ensure that the self-evaluation is an accurate and verifiable statement of the true state of affairs and is not used as an opportunity to make exaggerated claims that will cause the review team to doubt the reliability of the institution's view of itself.

4 Where an institution is in the process of making changes to aspects of its systems or procedures at the time of the review, evidence may not yet be available to illustrate the effectiveness of the new procedures. Where this is the case, the institution is encouraged to address in its self-evaluation the way in which it is managing the process of change.

Nature of the self-evaluation

5 At the heart of the review team's enquiries is the way in which the institution acts as an awarding body. The self-evaluation will need to reflect this. The 'awarding body function' is not simply a question of the soundness of the administrative procedures the institution follows when awarding degrees and other qualifications (although it does include this). It is a wider matter that reflects the institution's role as a member of the UK's higher education community, charged with a public responsibility for granting nationally (and internationally) recognised academic awards in a coherent and consistent manner. How policies and procedures are decided, how they meet the expectations of the higher education sector as a whole (through, for example, use of the qualifications framework, subject benchmark statements and the *Code of practice*), their specific contribution to securing academic standards and quality, and their effectiveness in achieving their objectives, provide a major focus for institutional review. The extent to which these matters are dealt with cogently and candidly in the institution's self-evaluation will be an important contributory factor in the review team's ability to judge how far the Agency can have confidence in the institution as an effective awarding body.

6 The self-evaluation should include reflections on the outcomes of subject reviews. These reports provide valuable audit trails to test the efficacy of the application of institutional policies within departments and other units. The self-evaluation should analyse the effectiveness of, rather than merely describe, an institution's quality assurance policies and processes, although some description will be necessary to enable the review team to understand the context in which policies are enacted. If the document does not contain careful and accurate analysis, the review team may ask for a longer visit, so that it can undertake its own fuller enquiries. Where an institution expresses a view that it is satisfied with the effectiveness of its processes, the evidence upon which this view is based should be made clear in the self-evaluation.

7 Some institutions - those without the necessary powers – do not have the responsibilities of degree-awarding bodies. Nonetheless, they have similar obligations to meet the requirements of the institution for whose awards their students are registered and may, in addition, award their own certificates and diplomas. As effective partners in collaborative activities they will be committed to ensuring that the academic standards and quality of provision of their students' awards and programmes are safeguarded as much by their own actions as through the formal responsibilities of the awarding institution. The self-evaluation will provide an opportunity for these institutions to show that they are aware of their informal as well as formal responsibilities and can demonstrate their commitment to ensuring academic standards and quality.

Scope of the self-evaluation

8 Review at institutional level relates to all educational provision for which the institution has responsibility, including undergraduate, postgraduate (taught and research), full-time, part-time, collaborative, overseas, distance and internet learning. The self-evaluation should reflect all of an institution's activities covered by these areas. Collaborative activities need not be included if it has been agreed that these will be subject to a separate review. In all other cases, the self-evaluation should consider the ways in which the institution addresses the precepts of the section of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision.

Structure, content and length of the self-evaluation

9 Institutions are invited to write their self-evaluations bearing in mind that review teams will produce a report that focuses on the questions contained in paragraph 2 above.

In preparing its self-evaluation, an institution should:

- i describe and analyse any developments since the last HEQC/QAA quality audit/institutional review (including the interim appraisal meeting);
- ii describe and analyse its responses to individual subject reviews undertaken since the last interim appraisal meeting and the ways in which lessons learnt from these have been taken into account in the enhancement of institutional practice;
- iii describe briefly the key features of its processes for assuring the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes focusing on the two main areas of scrutiny contained in paragraph 2 above;
- iv identify any precepts in the *Code of practice* to which it is not adhering, explaining what alternative approaches have been taken to ensure an effect equivalent to that intended by the precept;
- v provide a view on the perceived strengths and limitations of its current institutional quality assurance arrangements; and
- vi describe and discuss its intended strategy for the next three years to further enhance practice and remedy any shortcomings it has identified.

10 In preparing their self-evaluations, institutions may find it helpful to bear in mind, as prompts, the criteria applied to institutions seeking powers to award degrees or designation as universities. These include (among others) the requirement that:

- they have clear and consistently applied mechanisms for establishing their academic objectives and outcomes;
- they seek to ensure that their programmes of study consistently meet stated objectives and outcomes;
- programme performance is carefully and regularly monitored;
- the effectiveness of their learning and teaching infrastructure is carefully monitored;
- the academic and related support requirements of students studying away from the campus are taken into account;
- the standards of students' achievements are maintained at a recognised level, and there is a strategy for developing the quality of academic provision;
- effective action is taken to address weaknesses, promote strengths, and demonstrate accountability;
- their administrative systems are sufficient to manage their operations now and in the foreseeable future;
- the qualities and competencies of staff are appropriate for an institution with degree-awarding powers;
- staff are actively engaged with the pedagogic development of their discipline;
- staff maintain high professional standards and willingly accept the professional responsibilities associated with operating in a university environment.

11 Self-evaluations may typically be 30 to 40 pages in length, although there will be no penalty for shorter or longer submissions. A successful self-evaluation will minimise the need for further clarification by the review team, and provide a reliable starting point for the review visit, so keeping to a minimum the amount of time the team needs to spend collecting additional evidence.

Documentation linked to the self-evaluation

12 So far as possible, the self-evaluation should be a self-standing document. It should not need to be accompanied by numerous other papers. However, institutions may, if they wish, supplement their self-evaluation with any other documents they believe will help review teams to a fuller understanding of the institution and its structure and function. Following its briefing meeting, the team may ask for some key documents to be circulated to its members in advance of the visit, but the quantity of papers requested for such advance circulation will be kept to an absolute minimum.

13 The self-evaluation should also include a list of all collaborative partnerships in which the institution has a responsibility for an award and/or for the quality of provision. This list should include partnerships with institutions and other bodies, both in the UK and in other countries, and should include all validations; franchises; consortia; articulation and accreditation agreements; and distance learning partnerships, including those involving facilitating agents.

Confidentiality

14 The self-evaluation remains confidential to the Agency, but it will be available to the Agency's academic reviewers undertaking subject reviews. It is likely that the report will refer to and include quotations from the self-evaluation.

ANNEX M Guidance on producing the institutional review report

Introduction

1 This Annex offers guidance on preparing and drafting reports of institutional reviews. It should be read in conjunction with relevant sections of the *Handbook*, in particular paragraphs 121 to 128.

2 Each institutional review report will contain sections as follows:

- brief contextual introduction;
- picture of the institution as provided by the self-evaluation;
- overall approach to quality assurance as observed by the review team;
- commentary on the awarding body function;
- *Code of practice*: adherence;
- summary;
- action points, and any exemplary features.

There will also be two appendices:

- a tabular presentation of key numerical data relating to the time of the review;
- a list of collaborative provision and awards.

3 These sections may be further sub-divided depending on the matters addressed in each review.

4 Each section will be drafted by a member of the review team. Allocation of responsibility for drafting sections will be agreed at the briefing meeting. Sections will be constructed in the form:

| |
|------------------------------------|
| Description / Analysis / Judgement |
|------------------------------------|

Sections of the report

5 The sections of the report will be constructed as follows:

Section i Brief contextual introduction

This section will provide a thumbnail sketch of the institution and its main characteristics, as well as an outline of the review process. It will summarise the general outcomes of subject and programme reviews and will identify the main topics identified for the review and the reasons they have been chosen. It will also provide information about collaborative activity and how this has been dealt with in the report.

[Target: 1,000 words]

Section ii Picture of the institution as provided by the self-evaluation

This section will describe and analyse the self-evaluation and the picture of the institution that it paints. It will compare this picture with that derived from the Agency's initial or institutional profile and the record of achievement demonstrated by subject and programme review reports. It will identify any apparent major discrepancies for later discussion in the report. It will also highlight the strengths and limitations that the institution has recognised for itself. By the end of this section the reader should be clear about those matters addressed in the self-evaluation with which the review team is satisfied, and those targeted by the review team for particular consideration during the review.

[Target: 1,500 words]

Section iii Overall approach to quality assurance as observed by the review team

This section will contain a view of the effectiveness of the institution's strategic approach to quality management as evidenced by a reading of the self-evaluation, subject review reports, other relevant documents, and discussions during the review visit. It will report on the adequacy of the approach as a basis for present and future security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its provision, including provision offered in collaboration with partners or at a distance. It will describe in outline the key features of the institution's general arrangements for managing quality and standards; relevant recent and proposed further developments; and the extent to which the totality of available evidence demonstrates both the institution's capacity for critical self-evaluation and its willingness to act upon that self-evaluation.

If major changes in the institution's academic or management structures are being, or have recently been, introduced, this section may include a discussion of the way in which these changes have been managed.

[Target: 1,500 words]

Section iv Commentary on the awarding body function

This section will provide a commentary about the way the institution manages the 'awarding body function'. It will cover a number of topics, including the soundness of the administrative procedures the institution follows when awarding degrees and other qualifications. It will also comment on the institution's role as a member of the UK's higher education community, charged with responsibility for granting nationally (and internationally) recognised academic awards in a coherent and consistent manner. In doing this it will analyse how policies and procedures relating to academic standards meet the expectations of the higher education sector as a whole (through, for example, implementation of the qualifications framework, subject benchmark statements and the *Code of practice*), as well as those of the institution itself, and will provide a view on its effectiveness in achieving these objectives. The extent to which these matters are dealt with cogently and candidly in the institution's self-evaluation, drawing where appropriate on subject level review reports, will be an important contributory factor in the review team's ability to judge how far the Agency can have confidence in the institution as an effective awarding body.

In this section the report will look particularly at internal procedures for:

- definition and maintenance of academic standards;
- student assessment and classification of awards, including the role and use made of external examiners;
- assurance of internal and external comparability of academic standards;
- evaluation and improvement, and development, of its procedures for the management of academic standards.

[Target: 1,500 words]

Section v Code of practice: adherence

This section will report specifically on the way the institution is tackling the expectations of the Agency's *Code of practice*. In its self-evaluation the institution will have stated that it is adhering to all of the precepts of the *Code*, or will have indicated where development is still taking place, or will have explained where an alternative approach is being taken. This statement will, so far as possible, be published verbatim in the report. The report will then discuss in detail any major areas of non-adherence that have been examined in the course of the review. In all cases, it will include discussion of the institution's responses to the sections of the *Code* dealing with:

- programme approval, monitoring and review;
- assessment of students;
- external examining; and
- collaborative provision.

This section will indicate whether the Agency considers that any non-adherence is sufficiently material for it to wish to qualify the level of confidence it has in the institution's capacity and effectiveness to function as an awarding body or responsible higher education institution.

[Target: 1,000 words]

Section vi Summary

This section will contain a summary of the findings of the review. It will be written for a broad lay audience and will be readable as a stand-alone document. The summary will reflect accurately the contents of the full report, and it will not be necessary to read the main body of the report in order to understand the recommendations.

The summary will begin with a general comment on the extent to which the institution's strategy for assuring the quality of its academic provision, and the measures it has promoted to give effect to that strategy, enable it, now and in the future, to manage effectively its responsibilities for quality and standards. In doing so it will highlight any factors that are influencing, or are likely in future to influence, the institution's capacity to act more (or less) capably in this area, together with any other special circumstances of which the reader may need to be aware. It will also offer a judgement on the reliability of the institution's self-evaluation and how far this accurately reflects the institution's level of self-knowledge and ability to reflect critically on its academic responsibilities.

The second part will offer a judgement on the institution as an awarding body. It will comment on the extent to which the institution is fully aware of its responsibilities for maintaining its academic standards and is adequately in control of the academic standards of all of its awards, including those delivered through collaborative partnerships. Regard will be had to evidence from subject reviews of the way in which the institution uses the reference points provided by subject benchmark statements and the qualifications framework. A view will be expressed on the security of the institution's internal regulatory system and procedures for its awards.

The third part will provide a brief summary commentary on the institution's adherence to the *Code of practice*, highlighting any major causes for concern or areas where more detailed review would be advisable.

The final part will provide a brief overall summing-up of the report. It will include a statement of the general level of confidence that the Agency has in the institution as an effective organisation able to discharge its academic obligations as a responsible higher education institution and qualifications awarding body. This statement may include references to instances of exemplary practice or to particular areas where there is not (or cannot be, because of the absence of adequate evidence) confidence in the institution's policies and practices. More information about the nature of this statement is contained in Part 2, paragraphs 123 to 126.

[Target: 1,000 words]

Section vii Action points and exemplary features

This section will include a list of points which the review team considers require further attention by the institution. These will be categorised according to their importance and urgency into three groups:

- **essential** – matters which the team believes are currently putting academic standards and/or quality at risk, and which require urgent corrective action;
- **advisable** – matters which the team believes have the potential to put academic standards and/or quality at risk and which require either preventive, or less urgent corrective, action;
- **desirable** – matters which the team believes have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure academic standards.

This section will also include reference to any exemplary features noted by the review team (see Part 2, paragraph 127).

[No target, but unlikely to be more than 300 words]

Appendices

In addition to the eight sections of the report, there will be two appendices:

Appendix 1: a tabular presentation of key numerical data relating to the time of the audit (data to be provided by the institution);

Appendix 2: a list of collaborative partnerships, provision and awards (to be provided by the institution).

INSTITUTIONAL INTERVIEWEES

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Role</u> | <u>Institution</u> |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Dr J Graeme Roberts | Vice-Principal & Dean, Arts and Divinity | University of Aberdeen |
| Dr Trevor Webb | Academic Registrar | University of Aberdeen |
| Professor Jim McGoldrick | Vice-Principal | University of Abertay Dundee |
| Mr Alan Davidson | Director of Quality Assurance | University of Dundee |
| Professor David B Swinfen | Vice-Principal | University of Dundee |
| Dr Simon van Heyningen | Director of Quality Assurance | University of Edinburgh |
| Ms Sara Welham | Assistant Secretary | University of Edinburgh |
| Dr Ron Emanuel | Vice-Principal | University of Glasgow |
| Ms Wendy Muir | Senior Administrative Officer | University of Glasgow |
| Mr Pat Devlin | Assistant Principal (Quality) | Glasgow Caledonian University |
| Mr Brendan Ferguson | Head of Department Academic Administration | Glasgow Caledonian University |
| Professor Keith Cornwell | Director of Quality | Heriot Watt University |
| Professor Keith Dickinson | Assistant Principal (Academic Development) | Napier University |
| Ms Anne Pollock | Director Quality Enhancement Services | Napier University |
| Ms Donna McMillan | Assistant Registrar | University of Paisley |
| Ms Hilary Douglas | Academic Registrar | The Robert Gordon University |
| Professor John Harper | Assistant Principal | The Robert Gordon University |
| Professor Ron Piper | Professor | University of St Andrews |
| Dr Frank Quinault | Director of Academic Audit | University of St Andrews |
| Ms Thelma Barron | Assistant Registrar | University of Stirling |
| Professor Sally Brown | Deputy Principal | University of Stirling |
| Professor John Spence | Professor (former Vice-Principal) | University of Strathclyde |

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT INTERVIEWEES

| <u>Interviewee</u> | <u>Faculty (Generic)</u> | <u>SHEFC/QAA role</u> |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Arts | SHEFC Lead Assessor |
| 2 | Arts | SHEFC Lead Assessor |
| 3 | Business | SHEFC Lead Assessor |
| 4 | Science | SHEFC Lead Assessor |
| 5 | Arts | SHEFC Assessor |
| 6 | Business | SHEFC Assessor |
| 7 | Business | SHEFC Assessor |
| 8 | Engineering | SHEFC Assessor |
| 9 | Engineering | SHEFC Assessor |
| 10 | Business | QAA Academic Reviewer |

SECTOR INTERVIEWEES

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Role</u> | <u>Institution</u> |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Professor Colin Bell | Principal | University of Stirling |
| Dr Bill Harvey | Deputy Director (Quality and Learning Innovation) | SHEFC |
| Mr Norman Sharp | Head of Scottish Office | QAA |
| Professor Bill Stevely | Principal | The Robert Gordon University |

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Participant Name]

Deputy Principal Professor John Spence suggested that I contact you to discuss the possibility of [university] participating in the field research for my PhD thesis. Your assistance in this matter would be greatly appreciated. I know that you are extremely busy and receive numerous requests for assistance. However, I hope that you will be able to find time to help me pursue my research.

My study concerns the imposition of external accountability systems for the assessment of the quality of learning and teaching in Scottish universities. The primary focus is the influence of the SHEFC TQA system on institutional learning and teaching quality assurance mechanisms. I hope to include all thirteen Scottish universities in my research, and would be grateful if I could discuss with you the possible participation of [university] in the study. Participation would require a minimal amount of access being granted to myself for a very short period of time.

During the research I hope to establish an overview of the University's learning and teaching quality assurance structure and to interview two senior members of staff. Ideally, these would be the senior member of academic staff with institutional responsibility for academic quality matters, and a senior member of administrative staff with appropriate knowledge of the development of this area.

It would be extremely helpful if you could spare a small amount of time for me to more fully explain the nature of my field research in the hope that you will agree to participate.

I am a part-time PhD student in the Department of Human Resource Management, studying under the supervision of the Head of Department, Professor John Gennard. I am also an employee of the University of Strathclyde, reporting to the Academic Registrar, Dr Sue Mellows, on quality assurance matters and the Secretary to the University, Dr Peter West, on legal issues. The University is wholly supportive of my studies, but I can assure you that although the final thesis will acknowledge contributions and participation, it will not attribute specific details to individual respondents or institutions. An opportunity to comment on the field research will, of course, be provided to participants. In the interests of transparency, I have attached, for information, a list of the individuals and institutions that I have contacted regarding the field research.

I hope that it will be possible to arrange a brief visit to further discuss this matter with you. I can be contacted at the address below, or by telephone (0141 548 2477) or e-mail (c.williamson@mis.strath.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

Craig Williamson
Assistant Registrar
Secretariat

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Participant Name]

PHD RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the field research for my PhD thesis. I am scheduled to meet with you at [time and date]. It is anticipated that the interview will last approximately one hour. The interview will follow a semi-structured format. The general direction of the interview is indicated by the attached questions. It is hoped that within this framework it will be possible to explore your perceptions in greater depth and with specific regard to your institution.

If you have any questions prior to the interview, please do not hesitate to contact me (telephone - 0141 548 2477; e-mail – c.williamson@mis.strath.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

Craig Williamson
Assistant Registrar
Secretariat

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please complete the table in Question One prior to the interview.

The research is focused on addressing institutional reactions to the external accountability of learning and teaching. A key aspect is that each institution is culturally distinct. The following exercise does not aim to define the culture of your institution but merely wishes to establish that across the Scottish university sector the perceptions from key staff indicate that institutions are indeed distinct.

[The definitions and ten point distribution method are adopted from: McNay, I. (1995) From the Collegial Academy to Corporate Enterprise: The Changing Cultures of Universities in Schuller, T (ed) (1995) The Changing University?, England, SRHE and Open University Press.]

QUESTION ONE

After considering the attached general cultural definitions (see page 3), please distribute ten points among the four types to reflect your perception of the overall balance of the culture within your institution.

| | <u>COLLEGIUM</u> | <u>BUREAUCRACY</u> | <u>CORPORATION</u> | <u>ENTERPRISE</u> |
|-------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| <i>e.g.</i> | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |

Questions two to six indicate the format to be followed during the interview.

QUESTION TWO

With regard to your response to Question One, please provide some background as to your perception of the cultural balance within, and the academic focus of, your institution. For example, you may wish to elaborate on the University's balance between research and teaching, the research/teaching promotion criteria for staff, and the funding split for research and teaching. You may also wish to define the culture in terms other than those used in Question One.

Please identify any other relevant matters.

Questions Three to Five identify specific time periods.

Please focus your responses on how the University reacted to external accountability and how this was accordingly manifested in the structure, definition or formalisation of learning and teaching quality assurance procedures at an institutional level.

Although Question Six specifically asks for your summary views on external accountability, if it is more appropriate to do so when answering questions three to five, please share your perspectives on the beneficial and detrimental effects of external accountability.

QUESTION THREE

Pre 1992 SHEFC TQA

Within the context set out above, please share your perspectives of how the University reacted to the inception of external accountability for learning and teaching. Setting external examiner and professional accreditation processes aside, you may wish, for example, to consider the CVCP 'Academic Standards in the Universities' (Academic Audit) or CNAA work as a starting point.

QUESTION FOUR

SHEFC TQA 1992-1998

Within the context set out above, please share your perspectives of how the University reacted to the SHEFC TQA process (1992-1998). You may wish to illustrate your answers with reference to aspects of the process or the changes to the process that took place over the period.

QUESTION FIVE

POST SHEFC TQA (1998 - CURRENT)

Within the context set out above, please share your perspectives of how the University reacted to external accountability developments post SHEFC TQA. You may wish to illustrate your answers with reference to aspects of the QAA process; its contrast with SHEFC TQA; and possible future developments.

QUESTION SIX

Please share your summary perspectives regarding the institutional effects, benefits and detriments of the external accountability of learning and teaching. You may wish to return to points that you have touched upon earlier in the interview.

In particular, please comment on whether you feel that an ethos of continual internal quality assessment and improvement has been created or influenced by participation in external accountability processes or any accompanying processes borne out of such experiences.

GENERAL CULTURAL DEFINITIONS

COLLEGIUM

A key word for the collegium culture is 'freedom'. Liberty is seen as an objective of university provision. Collegium defines organisational expectations: institutional freedom from external controls; and academic autonomy. If the main tasks of the university are teaching and research, most developments will spring from these two activities and decisions will be based within the structures where they are organized – mainly discipline-based departments – within a frame of reference set by peer scholars in the international community. This is open to abuse through personal bias, it can be conservative and may not work except in small organizations.

BUREAUCRACY

In the bureaucracy culture, regulation becomes important. This can have many objectives: consistency of treatment in areas such as equal opportunities or financial allocations; quality of activities by due process of consideration; propriety of behaviour by regulatory oversight; efficiency through standard operating procedures. Committees become arenas for policy development or commentary and iteration with the executive. There are problems here, too: a concern for consistency of standards can lead to standardization for convenience; novel ideas cannot be judged through accumulated case law from established ideas; the rigidity can be compounded by the time involved in the cycle of decision-making. It may be a good model for maintenance in stability but not for rapid change. It has an appearance of rationality, with, often, use of statistical bases to arguments and decisions, but can be contaminated by political manipulation.

CORPORATION

In the corporation culture, the executive asserts authority, with the vice-chancellor as chief executive: indeed, the key word here is 'power'. This power culture is probably dominant, particularly in the treatment of people, with a consequent reaction of resentment, at times verging on anomie. It is suggested that this culture cannot be maintained for long periods without such consequences: it is a culture for crisis, not continuity. It is political also in its processes of bargaining and negotiation, with senior staff developing alliances and understandings outside formal decision arenas and disempowering committees. Working parties with members appointed, not elected, set agendas and condition outcomes. There are echoes in this model of the centralizing authoritarian state and its quangos in the UK during the 1980s, with an equal risk of the isolation of policy makers from reality, with a functional distinction drawn on the basis that 'teachers teach, managers manage'. The necessary iteration, and mutual information, between the two break down, thus subverting the aims of loyalty or domestication.

ENTERPRISE

In the enterprise culture, the key word is 'client'. That carries with it connotations not only of the market, where *customers* would be more appropriate, but of professionalism where the knowledge and skills of experts, and the needs and wishes of those seeking their services, come together. In organization terms, it means that key decisions should be located close to the client, within a well-defined general policy framework, and that the good of the client should be the dominant criterion for decision-making. It is, in a world of resource constraint and accountability, also about costing, but in university terms it can also be about a curriculum committed to serve diverse communities or to develop enterprise skills and competencies. There are dangers: of curriculum distortion if it is conditioned by cost – sponsors of chairs are not evenly spread across subjects, for example; of compromise on standards if what paying clients want is a qualification and if payment systems depend on results; of loss of coherence and continuity if the fashions become too dominant. Education may become contaminated by commercial values.

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Participant Name]

The Principal has kindly agreed that the University will act as a case study for my PhD research. Your assistance in this matter would be greatly appreciated. I know that you are extremely busy and have numerous demands on your time. However, I hope that you will be able to help me pursue my research.

I am a part-time PhD student in the Department of Human Resource Management, studying under the supervision of the Head of Department, Professor John Gennard. [Details of link with institution]. The University is wholly supportive of my studies.

My study concerns the influence of the external accountability of learning and teaching on Scottish universities during the period 1992-2002. To-date my field research has involved interviewing appropriate senior officers, senior academics, and senior administrators in each of the thirteen Scottish universities. Each university has enthusiastically participated and I am confident that the information that I have gathered will serve my thesis well.

I would like to consider the relevance of my institutional interviews by conducting a case study at departmental level. This will involve undertaking brief interviews with Heads or former Heads of Department who have also participated, or been nominated to participate, as SHEFC/QAA reviewers at subject level.

Your participation would entail reading a very brief overview of my initial institutional interview research and taking part in an interview lasting approximately thirty minutes, during which you will be invited to comment as to your personal experience and perspective. The thesis will not identify the institution or the case study interviewees. An opportunity to review the interview transcript will, of course, be provided.

I aim to conduct the interviews in June or July, if possible. I would be delighted to provide you with any further background that you may require before you decide whether or not to participate.

I hope that you will be able to find time to aid my research. I can be contacted by telephone (ext. 2477), e-mail (c.williamson@mis.strath.ac.uk), or by writing to me at the address given.

Yours sincerely

Craig Williamson
Assistant Registrar

PhD RESEARCH: EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

An overview of the Institutional Interview phase of the research is set out below. You are invited to comment on any of the statements in terms of how they may relate to your experience and perceptions. The scope of the overview has not been edited. However, you may feel more comfortable commenting on some areas than others. Please feel free to be selective as to which elements you choose to elaborate on during the interview.

1. Institutional Cultures; Teaching/Research Balance; Promotion Reality

- The thirteen universities in the Scottish Higher Education sector are culturally distinct.
- Generally, the institutional balance favoured research over teaching in pre-1992 universities. However, teaching was considered to be a core activity and to be of a high standard.
- Generally, the institutional balance favoured teaching over research in post-1992 universities. However, research was pursued to a level consistent with the institutional mission.
- Although promotion criteria included teaching and administration, generally promotion to senior positions (e.g. Professor) was heavily based upon research. Although an increased focus on recognising teaching contributions was emerging, this only had a limited impact on senior promotions. Institutions sought to continue to pursue this avenue. The difficulty in assessing the quality of an individual's teaching was highlighted, although some institutions felt that progress had been made on this issue.

2. Participation in Sector Consultations and as Reviewers/Assessors

- Although institutions actively participated in the SHEFC TQA consultations, the QAA period generally brought a broader range of institutional and subject-area participation (e.g. through Benchmarking Groups). Further a collective approach, utilising formal (e.g. Research Intensive Universities; Universities Scotland) and informal networks was more readily adopted, or used to a greater extent, by institutions.
- The above points could be related to both an increased awareness of the importance of the potential impact of external accountability and a concern that only a concerted and focused input from institutions would influence the final system.
- Generally, there was institutional encouragement for academics to participate as reviewers in the SHEFC and QAA processes but the final decision was left to individual members of staff. Institutions that initially decided against providing TQA nominations changed their policy in the short term. At the outset of TQA, Heads of Departments often participated on their own initiative. Although participation remained strong there was a perception of diminished enthusiasm among staff to be involved during the QAA period.
- The primary reason (and benefit) for participating was the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the process. Other reasons were: as a protective measure to ensure membership of review teams, particularly in small cognate areas; the opportunity to witness practice in other institutions (also an identified benefit); and as a recognition of the value of peer review processes.

3. Approaches and Reactions to External Accountability

- Generally, committee and reporting structures remained the same, adapting to incorporate the additional TQA/QAA business as appropriate. Where structures changed this was often seen as being for institutional purposes, although there was also an awareness of external factors.
- Internal review processes evolved during this period. Generally, pre-1992 universities introduced greater formality to their processes. This largely occurred during the TQA period. Generally, post-1992 universities retained their CNAA-based mechanisms but, over varying periods of time, sought to streamline their processes. Across the sector, universities sought, internally, to harmonise their own processes with the existing and likely development and evolution of the institution.

- TQA led to a greater awareness of external accountability and, accordingly, internal quality assurance arrangements, amongst institutions and academics. Generally, in the pre-1992 universities there was a move to a greater recognition and formalisation of the link between the centre of the institution and departments regarding quality assurance. Generally, in the post-1992 universities there was a move to a greater recognition that the satisfaction of external accountability was the responsibility of departments as well as of the centre of the institution. All universities were aware of the value of achieving the appropriate balance between departmental ownership and central university overview, and were focused on achieving this.
- Leadership was a central factor in institutional and departmental approaches and change. During the early TQA period, central leadership was particularly evident in pre-1992 universities, perhaps because at this point in time their systems were generally less formal than in the former CNAA institutions. Leadership at departmental level was evident in both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, with Heads of Departments often compensating for any initial shortfall in central university support or guidance. Conversely, as external accountability became embedded, where an institution viewed that departments were evidencing less focus than was expected of them, faculty or institutional senior officers, or appropriately empowered committees, would seek to redress this.
- Although support for departments varied amongst institutions, across the sector universities developed or adapted processes that allowed institutions and their constituent departments to satisfy external accountability in a manner appropriate to the university's culture and structure. Generally this involved the creation and operation of a variety of evolving formal and informal mechanisms which aided assessment preparation and also facilitated institutional understanding of the process and digestion of review outcomes.

4. Benefits, Detriments, and the Influence of External Accountability

- A key benefit of external accountability was that it led to a greater awareness of the importance of quality assurance. There was evidence of a more focused approach to course and student documentation; the recognition of, and action on, student views; and a greater propensity for staff to actively review the aims of courses and the methods employed to achieve them.
- The above statement does not suggest that teaching was not already of a high standard, or that staff were not focused on their courses. Indeed, there was doubt as to whether the TQA and QAA processes had led to an improvement in the existing high standard of actual teaching. However, there was a strong indication that pre-existing measures were fine-tuned, became more standard in their practice, or gained a higher priority.
- The amount of time expended by institutions and departments was highlighted as a key burden, as was the financial cost of having central university and departmental staff devoted to satisfying the requirements of external accountability.
- There was concern that the retrospective and bureaucratic nature of external accountability could foster a culture of compliance rather than one of evaluation and innovation.
- Although external accountability led to an increased focus on quality assurance issues, factors such as academic professionalism, in terms of approaching the review process, and also inter-institution and inter-subject area competition during assessments, were often evident. Thus the external accountability process was not the sole reason for some of the benefits accrued, although it perhaps acted as a catalyst.
- There was a general body of opinion, more consistently voiced by the pre-1992 universities though also clearly evident in the post-1992 universities, that the existence of TQA enhanced or ensured institutional awareness of teaching and related issues in a period when the RAE could possibly have further diverted institutional attentions towards research.

- There was some evidence that TQA had brought institutions closer together, certainly regarding the discussion of quality assurance issues. This may partly have been as a result of a belief that only a concerted effort would ensure that universities had an influence on the operation and development of external accountability.
- Regarding the above point, the Universities Scotland (formerly COSHEP) Teaching Quality Forum (TQF) was recognised as being a valuable mechanism for exchanging institutional views on sector-wide quality assurance and external accountability developments. The TQF benefited from a small amount of member institutions; the relative ease of travel afforded by the geography of Scotland; the open nature of discussions; and the willingness of the QAA to participate in the spirit of the forum. Also, the existence of a QAA Scottish Office, and in particular the approachable nature of its management, was recognised as a factor in maintaining an effective dialogue between the universities and those operating the external process.
- Preparation for external reviews often brought individual departments closer together than was previously the case. However, the internal momentum created could be lost if the department felt it had wrongly received a poor result.
- Although some interviewees felt that the operation of external accountability processes had enhanced relationships between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions in terms of subject area interaction, others felt that appropriate subject groups already existed and as such there was no substantial change. There was also a strong view that the competitive nature of external accountability was detrimental to sector-wide subject area relationships, particularly but not entirely, in small cognate areas or when concern was expressed about the validity of judgements.
- Views varied as to whether external accountability had brought the enlarged sector closer together, particularly given that a number of other factors influenced the sector during this period. However, generally, there was support for the assertion that the pre-1992 universities were becoming more accepting, though perhaps reluctantly, of the reality of external accountability, while post-1992 universities were becoming more vocal and less passively compliant than previously. However, it was acknowledged that although there was some convergence, the two sides of the former Binary Line remained distinct.

5. Summary/Conclusion

- The greater awareness of the importance of quality assurance issues has enhanced the institutional ethos of developing and maintaining strong learning and teaching provision. Although there is varying acceptance of the need for external accountability, there is a general acknowledgement within institutions that, in some form or another, external accountability will continue to have an influence on the sector. This sector-wide institutional recognition, linked to an existing internal focus, has, to an extent, empowered those with central responsibility for quality assurance to continually review internal processes to both ensure that the satisfaction of external requirements can be appropriately aligned with the culture and operation of their university and to further develop their institution's internal quality assurance and enhancement agenda.
- Generally, it was viewed that the benefits to be gained from TQA were accrued during the period of its operation, thus its continued presence may have had little additional impact. Although the QAA seemed to offer a progressive, developmental agenda, the fast pace, formal nature, and broad extent of its intervention meant that institutions found it difficult to benefit from the aspects that they valued. Regarding the QAA portfolio, some post-1992 institutions welcomed the articulation of the broader standards agenda, but some pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions viewed it as being onerous and compliance-oriented.
- Given that ten years of external accountability served to evidence that learning and teaching provision was of a high standard, a less intrusive, institution rather than subject focused, approach was sought by institutions. Within this a certain level of review was anticipated but there was a desire that it would inform an agenda of development and enhancement rather than foster a compliance culture.

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Participant Name]

The Principal of the University of Strathclyde, Professor Andrew Hamnett, has kindly agreed that I can approach you regarding participation in my PhD research. Your assistance in this matter would be greatly appreciated. I know that you are extremely busy and receive numerous requests for assistance. However, I hope that you will be able to find time to help me pursue my research.

I am a part-time PhD student in the Department of Human Resource Management, studying under the supervision of the Head of Department, Professor John Gennard. I am also an employee of the University of Strathclyde, reporting to the Academic Registrar, Dr Sue Mellows, on quality assurance matters and the Secretary to the University, Dr Peter West, on legal issues. The University is wholly supportive of my studies.

My study concerns the influence of the external accountability of learning and teaching on Scottish universities during the period 1992-2002. To-date my field research has involved interviewing appropriate senior officers, senior academics, and senior administrators in each of the thirteen Scottish universities. Each university has enthusiastically participated and I am confident that the information that I have gathered will serve my thesis well.

I am currently reviewing the relevance of my research by undertaking a case study involving brief interviews with Heads or former Heads of Departments who have also participated as SHEFC/QAA reviewers at subject level.

In addition to this, I would also like to interview four key individuals, of which you are one, who can provide my study with a sector-wide perspective. The other individuals are:

- [Sector Interviewee]
- [Sector Interviewee]; and
- [Sector Interviewee].

Your participation would entail reading a very brief overview of my initial institutional interview research and taking part in a thirty to sixty minute interview, during which you will be invited to comment as to your personal experience and perspective.

I can assure you that although the final thesis will acknowledge contributions and participation, it will not attribute comments to individual respondents or institutions. An opportunity to review the interview transcript will, of course, be provided. In the interests of transparency, I have attached a list of the institutional interviewees that have participated during the first stage of my field research.

I aim to conduct the interviews over the summer, if possible. I would be delighted to provide you with further background, answer any questions, or visit you to discuss the matter, before you decide whether or not to participate.

I hope that you will be able to find time to aid my research. I can be contacted at the address overleaf, or by telephone (0141 548 2477) or e-mail (c.williamson@mis.strath.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

Craig Williamson
Assistant Registrar
Secretariat

| UNIVERSITY | INTERVIEWEE (title as at time of interview) |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ABERDEEN | Dr J Graeme Roberts Vice-Principal |
| | Dr Trevor Webb Academic Registrar |
| ABERTAY DUNDEE | Professor Jim McGoldrick Vice-Principal |
| DUNDEE | Professor David B Swinfen Vice-Principal |
| | Mr Alan Davidson Director of Quality Assurance |
| EDINBURGH | Dr Simon van Heyningen Director of Quality Assurance |
| | Ms Sara Welham Assistant Secretary |
| GLASGOW | Dr Ron Emanuel Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching) |
| | Ms Wendy Muir Senior Administrative Officer |
| GLASGOW CALEDONIAN | Mr Pat Devlin Assistant Principal (Quality) |
| | Mr Brendan Ferguson Head of Department, Academic Administration |
| HERIOT WATT | Professor Keith Cornwell Director of Quality |
| NAPIER | Professor Keith Dickinson Assistant Principal (Academic Development) |
| | Ms Anne Pollock Director of Quality Enhancement Services |
| PAISLEY | Ms Donna McMillan Assistant Registrar |
| ROBERT GORDON | Professor John Harper Assistant Principal |
| | Ms Hilary Douglas Academic Registrar |
| ST. ANDREWS | Dr Frank Quinault Director of Academic Audit |
| | Professor Ron Piper School of Divinity |
| STIRLING | Professor Sally Brown Deputy Principal |
| | Ms Thelma Barron Assistant Registrar |
| STRATHCLYDE | Professor John Spence Former Vice Principal |