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ABSTRACT

This publication presents seven papers as well as workshop summaries from a conference on managing quality assurance frameworks of further education and higher education validating bodies in the United Kingdom. Two opening papers reflect on managing quality assurance: "Key Issues" (Anne Stennett) and "Quality Fears at the FE/HE Interface" (John Bird). Three papers represent contributions from three quality regulating organizations--the Higher Education Quality Council, the Further Education Funding Council, and the Business and Technology Education Council--and describe their respective quality assurance frameworks. The papers are: "Managing Quality Assurance and Making it Work" (John Hilbourne); Current Developments in FE: Implications for Quality Assurance at the FE/HE Interface" (Terry Melia); and "Quality: Building it in and Checking it Out (Who Shares Wins)" (Chris Chapman). The third section offers two papers addressing the practical aspects of managing the quality assurance process: "Progression from FE to HE: Managing Quality Assurance Where the Baton is Exchanged" (Mike Abramson) and "Quality Assurance: Managing and Getting the Commitment" (Paul Gallagher and Peter Chambers). A final section summarizes three workshops on the topics of identifying the issues, managing quality assurance, and formulating recommendations for enhancing quality. (JB)

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Mendip Papers

The Staff College

FEDA Further Education Development Agency

# Managing quality assurance at the FE/HE interface

Edited by Sue Brownlow

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**About the editor**

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Sue Brownlow worked as a management consultant for six years before joining The Staff College in 1992. Her consultancy clients included many further and higher education institutions and a range of work from new course feasibility studies to strategic planning and merger advice. Since joining The Staff College she has been responsible for developments in strategic management and the college's higher education programme. Other publications include the **Strategic planning handbook**, a joint Staff College/ Further Education Unit guide to strategic planning in further education and Mendip Papers on funding flexibility and financing accommodation developments.

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Mendip Papers

# Managing quality assurance at the FE/HE interface

Edited by Sue Brownlow

*Contents*

# Introduction

*Sue Brownlow and Anne Stennett*

The 1994 annual joint conference held by The Staff College and the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) took as its theme 'Managing quality assurance at the FE/HE interface'. This rather lengthy but, we hope, clear title was reached only after considerable debate among the conference team about the nature of quality and its assurance, management and control, and the realisation that the burgeoning quality industry in further and higher education was in danger of confusing all of us with its plethora of labels, methodologies, concepts and acronyms.

The conference aimed to shed some practical light on one of the most thorny problems of quality assurance faced by many institutions. Quality assurance frameworks can be onerous enough even when a college or university is responding to just one set of external references. As further education colleges, with their broad curriculum, have known for some time, juggling the sometimes conflicting demands of numerous different validating bodies is not an easy task. Partnership arrangements between further and higher education raise exactly these difficulties, challenging both sides to review and reflect on their quality assurance mechanisms and to learn from practices which are sometimes very different from their own tradition.

But we did not just want to take out a microscope to 'inspect' – another quality concept the conference needed to get to grips with – quality assurance. The title managing quality assurance emphasised that the onus is on institutions and the various sector-wide bodies with an interest in quality to be proactive in developing and implementing new quality assurance arrangements appropriate for the emerging models of curriculum delivery.

In her introduction, conference organiser Professor Anne Stennett offered a timely reminder that quality assurance is simply a means to an end, not an end in itself, and that that end must be focused on the experience of our main partners in the learning process, the students themselves. We would laugh at the idea that quality assurance in a motor car factory might not consider whether or not the cars could be driven away, but the genuine difficulties of measuring the quality of the student experience in education can sometimes lead us perilously close to a framework which manages everything except that which really matters. Lorna Fitzsimons, past president of the national union of students, reinforced this message in her after-dinner address at the conference by reminding us not only of how good higher education can be at its best, but also of some of the real lapses in quality we sometimes inflict on our students as a result of the most basic collection of errors.

Some of the concerns of the conference committee are reflected in the first two papers of this publication, which are reflections on the nature of quality assurance and the key issues involved. The first paper is drawn from the responses of conference members to a request to identify what were for them the key issues which they wanted the conference to address. The issues were wide ranging, and are reproduced here as an important part of the development agenda for those working and researching in the field. The second paper, from John Bird of the University of the West of England, challenges us to reflect on whether we really have a 'quality problem' in FE/HE partnerships, or whether the issue is actually one of power and control as we all seek reassurance in a fast-changing area of development.

The next papers represent contributions from three of the quality 'regulators' – the Higher Education Quality Council, Further Education Funding Council and Business and Technology Education Council. John Hilbourne reflects on two recent studies of quality in FE/HE partnerships and the lessons for good practice which they identify. The issues of validation and audit are inextricably linked to quality assurance, and many of the themes raised in this thoughtful paper were debated at length in workshop sessions and, perhaps more revealingly, in the bar after the close of the formal business of the day. Terry Melia's contribution looks at the arrangements for quality assurance in the FE and HE sectors and explores how these might be applied to collaborative arrangements. Chris Chapman's paper looks at the practice of

how BTEC is building its quality framework to take account of the needs of institutions and other 'fellow travellers' – auditors, lead bodies, etc. – so that confidence can be established on all sides.

The final pair of papers come from the sharp end of practical experience of managing quality assurance in institutions. Mike Abramson from the University of Central Lancashire discusses the development of his institution's extensive partnerships with further education colleges and highlights the ways in which these partnerships are challenging the university's definitions of quality and of the nature of higher education itself. In particular, he reminds us that different students may themselves prioritise different aspects of higher education provision – caring about accessibility and tutorial support more than library facilities, for example – and that institutional definitions of quality need to recognise these distinctions. Paul Gallagher and Peter Chambers from Bradford and Ilkley Community College talk about the process of developing a quality culture in an institution which has combined HE and FE provision for many years; their image of using quality assurance to build the 'ladder of opportunity' for students was a powerful one which struck a chord with many of the conference delegates.

Finally, what were for us some of the highlights of the conference took place in a series of workshop sessions which brought together practitioners from further education and higher education to share their perspectives on the contributions and develop the key conference themes; this was the further and higher education interface at work. A summary of the reports from these workshops forms the final paper in this series. Recommendations include the need for much better co-ordination between those responsible for the national policy agenda, the need for the ladder of progression between further and higher education to be constructed more clearly through an integrated credit-based system, and the need for quality assurance frameworks to recognise the diversity of further education institutional missions and not impose the higher education partner's model uncritically on the college.

The main concern to emerge from the closing debate at the conference was a fear that, without supportive funding arrangements, all the good practice that had been discussed could be undermined. Funding teaching and learning in further and higher education will therefore form the theme for the next joint conference in September 1995.

# Reflections on managing quality assurance



## Key issues

*Anne Stennett, Conference Co-ordinator*

**In advance of the conference, each delegate was invited to indicate what were the key issues within the conference theme. The various responses were then analysed. Together they suggest the following eight key areas; and these formed the basis of conference discussions.**

### Why quality assurance for the FE/HE interface, what constitutes effectiveness in QA in collaborative activities and how can it be made more effective?

- How quality assurance arrangements can be utilised to improve the quality and standards of what is delivered to the students.

- The need to develop an effective but minimally bureaucratic quality assurance FE/HE interface which maintains academic standards but also satisfies the wider needs of the FE sector and the HE sector.

- Understanding the nature of the FE/HE interface and evaluating the quality assurance mission; knowledge of and respect for QA as it operates in the other sector; appreciating the different cultures in relation to quality in the chartered universities, in the 'new' universities and in FE colleges.

- Defining responsibility as between national agencies with an interest in QA, and within and across institutions (see also below).

- Criteria for establishing a national benchmark/national quality frameworks; how quality for FE/HE collaboration is defined and measured, and then enhanced.

- The need to develop strategies for managing, publicly but sensitively, the devolution of responsibilities to a range of institutions at (what may need to be) differential rates.

- Remembering variety – of forms of provision and the variety of approaches to QA. Is variety a threat to standards? How extensive is the perception of academic dilution resulting from delivery at a distance, and is there any justification for it?

### Developing and managing quality assurance procedures and systems

- Ensuring appropriateness: for HE programmes in the FE college context, where HE forms only a part of the total provision.

- Ensuring congruence within the FE college of quality assurance procedures for both FE and HE: avoiding divisiveness; providing a college-wide QA approach.

- Establishing ownership of QA by all parties; the possible developing dichotomy between quality assurance arrangements imposed 'from on high' and the principle (e.g. TQM) that quality itself is best achieved and

improved if every individual involved takes full responsibility for the quality of what he/she delivers.

- How should QA work in joint programme provision?

- The balance between local flexibility/ responsiveness to opportunities and the assurance of quality.

- Developing appropriate monitoring and evaluation instruments/measures.

- Is there a model, or agreed principles for models, of QA relevant to the FE/HE interface?

- Establishing best practice from each of the sectors and applying it collaboratively at the outset of any partnership.

## Staff development

- Judging capability for FE/HE collaboration.

- Basic/rationale used by universities/HEIs in judging FE college capability for HE work.

- Provision of joint professional development.

- Balance of peer support and authentic individual capability.

- Robustness for peer validation and peer evaluation.

## Relating to the various national assessment and auditing agencies

- What is/should be the role of various national agencies? How does the audit process work? Is the framework for assessment for HE and for FE essentially the same? What are the differences?

- Are the expectations of HEFC, FEFC, HEQC consistent with regard to quality assurance?

- Academic validators, professional accreditors and funding councils each has a particular quality assurance framework – how to interact with these positively.

- The problem of developing parallel quality systems for FE and for HE whilst HEFC, FEFC and HEQC are on different tracks; can their expectations be harmonised to permit the development of single corporate institutional practice?

- How to meet both HE and FE inspection criteria.

- Government policy regarding the recognition of various awards - e.g. the HND/degree route. Who funds what? (See next section.)

## Resource issues

- The need for guidelines on costings of collaborative activities.

- Ensuring cost effectiveness in collaboration.

- The interface between FEFC/HEFC on matters relating to QA and to funding, including capital funding and research funding (see above).

- Maintaining FE/HE links within a diminishing resource base; managing in a changing financial climate.

- Ensuring fairness and parity of treatment financially between partner institutions.

## The student experience

- How relevant is the non-academic 'student experience'?

- Achieving parity for students:
  - standards;
  - credit/credit transfer opportunities;
  - admissions;
  - progression;
  - the total 'student experience'.

- Taking account of the charters.

## The FE/HE interface: the promotion of FHE partnership

- Getting the right proactive relationship between FE and HE; maintaining the distinctive missions of HE and of FE.
- The basis/rationale for choice of partner(s).
- Strategic planning of HE development, in the collaborative mode, in the current funding climate.
- Is collaboration worthwhile? What advice to (as yet) non-participant institutions? What are the main management issues?
- Establishing a research framework for FHE activities and initiatives.
- To what extent is there consensus that long-distance collaboration is undesirable?
- Managing competition as between institutions within each sector and as affecting cross-sector combinations; issues of marketing.
- Rationalising provision across FE/HE into regional networks.

## Networking

- The need to identify, disseminate and support good practice across both sectors.
- The quality of intelligence and information across the FE/HE interface; assessing information about existing effective QA systems.
- Setting up support networks/networks for partnership.
- Transferability of FE/HE collaborative models, e.g. to the education/employment interface.

# Quality fears at the FE/HE interface

*John Bird, University of the West of England*

There is a film (I think directed by Wim Wenders) called **The goalkeepers' fear of the penalty kick.** I take both the title of this paper and the theme of this paper from that film. The title of this paper could be **The quality councils' fears of the interface**; the theme is that (a) there is more fear of collaboration between FE and HE than is merited by the realitites of such collaboration and (b) some of the fear relates to factors that have little to do with reality and more to do with psychological worries over lack of control. I would like – as a sociologist much influenced by psychoanalysis – to say most about the latter, but that would not fit my remit so I shall restrict myself in the main to discussing collaboration.

However, there is an important point about (b): some time in the 1970s a psychoanalytically sympathetic sociologist, Eliot Jacques, wrote a paper entitled **Social systems as a defence against persecutory and depressive anxieties** (1977). The theme of that paper would be the theme of the paper I will not give here, but is a theme that is, in my view, important to the quality debate. The theme is that we all have anxieties about things getting out of control and, in part, all social systems – including systems of quality assurance and control – relate to, and serve to dampen down those fears. In other words, particularly if there is some new system in operation, there is a deep-seated fear that it cannot work as well as what we have already; therefore we set up elaborate systems to record, file, analyse, place under surveillance, and subject to self-confession and truth telling, those new systems. It is a part of the rich fantasy life of institutions – our own included – that what goes on in other institutions is subject to suspicion and fear, especially where they are our competitors, so what is more natural than to set up institutions of surveillance to make sure that their quality is as good as ours?

I will now return to what I am supposed to say. In essence, I want to identify a number of related themes:

- that there is rightly diversity in F/HE collaboration (franchising, joint courses, 2+2 systems, etc.);
- that diversity relates to fitness for purpose and makes a distinction between hierarchies of quality and diversity of qualities important;
- that diversity should be maintained, in particular because diversity is usually related to local community needs within particular collaborative ventures and to diversity of institutional missions;
- that there is no necessary link between diversity and either a lack of quality or difficulties in operationalising systems of quality assurance;
- that diversity makes a simple and single model for quality impossible to achieve.

The themes all relate to a critique of what can best be called quality fears. These are best exemplified in the 1989 and 1991 HMI reports on what was then regularly termed franchising (DES 1989, 1991). To take some quotations at random:

- *library resources are generally poor [in FE];*
- *[teachers in FE] are less well qualified academically than those teaching similar courses in polytechnics;*
- *quality control procedures are poorly developed and applied in many [FE colleges].*

The 1991 document reiterates these and adds two more:

- *lack of a research culture in FE;*
- *poor progression rates for part-time students.*

This is then integrated into a general critique: that HE provision in FE can often not reproduce the

experience – for students and for staff – of studying in HE. It could however do this under certain circumstances – adequate funding, the use of HE quality assurance mechanisms in FE, the restrictions of franchising to first year courses (or sometimes whole HNDs). In other words, it can do it if it will be like HE.

This – which some will see as a convenient parody of what the HMI documents say – raises a number of issues for me about the F/HE interface and quality assurance:

- what HE experience is being reproduced? What we might call the good side (good libraries, a research culture) or the less good (large class sizes, crowded facilities, distance from where mature students live)? Those of us working in the field know that both FE and HE, in collaboration, have strengths and weaknesses, and the balance may not be to the favour of HE. We must reflect on whether there is such a thing as the essence of HE which FE must aim for.
- the HMI critique, partly a creature of its time, is based on a limited view of collaboration, i.e. franchising; it is less concerned with what, I hope, are becoming genuine partnerships in which recognition of strengths and weaknesses is being openly accepted.
- if there are genuine partnerships – and we must be wary of the strongly rhetorical significance of the word partnership – then they have an ethos of trust and openness; with partners in FE and HE working together, for example, in developing, validating and recognising programmes.
- we can identify a process which moves us from a 'you must', through a 'you should', to a 'we all do' model. Many HEIs seem to wish it to be thought that they are at a stage three, whereas FEIs sometimes feel that things are closer to stage one!
- we must give a central importance to the student experience of collaborative ventures (Haselgrove 1994). Students in FE see major strengths in HE provision in FE (it is local, classes are small, tutors are approachable); and they worry about HE provision in HE (large classes, crowded libraries). They are willing to trade FE strengths off against some weaknesses (lack of student union facilities; lack of staff research experience) and this can lead them to want more than first year degree programmes in FE. These provide major challenges to the HMI view.
- this last observation may worry the FEFC because it is haunted by the spectre of mission drift; that FE will become HE with HE provision crowding out traditional FE work and with staff scrambling to do the HE teaching.

## Conclusion

We could usefully contrast user and provider models of collaboration, although no real situation will completely fit the model:

| *User* | *Provider* |
|---|---|
| Dialogue | Monologue |
| Partnerships | Franchises |
| Openness | Closure |
| Student-centred | Staff-centred |

Hopefully, real collaboration will approach the provider model.

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# Quality assurance frameworks



## Managing quality assurance and making it work

*John Hilbourne, Higher Education Quality Council*

### Introduction

This contribution looks at the management of further and higher education links under two heads. Firstly, I shall be dealing with the recent changes in Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) strategy and how these are being implemented and managed. Secondly, I shall look at some of the implications of two recent studies of F/HE collaborative working in England and Scotland.

### The role of HEQC

The HEQC's role is to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of higher education at all levels in UK institutions. It does this by auditing HE institutions' quality assurance processes, undertaking a series of enhancement activities which address system-wide issues, developing credit accumulation and access, and advising the Privy Council on applications for degree awarding powers.

Recent ministerial statements have focused on standards issues in quality assurance. The HEQC has of course been giving increasing emphasis to these issues for some time as they have emerged as important to those inside and outside the system who wondered about quality and the pace and direction of change.

In April 1994 the Secretary of State emphasised the government's belief in the need for comparability of standards throughout higher education. He also said that the government required the HEQC to pay attention to the broad comparability of standards in British higher education.

The CVCP (Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals) accepted that through the HEQC universities should take responsibility for defining threshold standards and estaolishing that institutions are maintaining these.

The HEQC will respond in two ways:

- its boards will encourage institutions to provide more information on the way in which standards are set and maintained. There will be a sharper focus on standards in the Council's audits of on-campus and collaborative provision; and

- it will seek to provide a national resource which enables institutions to demonstrate to a wider range of stakeholders how standards are maintained, and how threshold standards are identified and enforced.

In this context standards are defined as 'explicit levels of attainment which are used to describe

and measure requirements of individual students and groups of students'.

Collaborative provision on the present scale is relatively new. Consistency and comparability in the level of awards and standard of student learning in this area have not gone unquestioned. Over two years ago the HEQC began a series of separate validation of audits of HEIs with a significant range of off-campus work. These audits have been developed and refined, and a consultative exercise conducted with various stakeholders which has resulted in further changes.

Collaborative audits are not audits of FE institutions: it is the HEIs' quality assurance arrangements which are being audited. The audits address the central question of how it is that an HEI assures itself, its partners, its students and other stakeholders that its off-campus awards are of equivalent quality and standard to those offered on-campus. Only as a part of this, representatives from FEIs may be invited to meet HEQC audit teams by the HEIs with which they are associated.

## Lessons from research into collaboration

The remainder of this contribution draws on two studies of F/HE collaborative links in England and Scotland. The first of these was conducted in the early summer of 1993 and the second in the spring of 1994. They were intended to inform the Council on a range of current issues relating to F/HE links. The methodology has been described in detail elsewhere but briefly, it involved visits to a small number of HE and FE institutions, and discussion with government departments, the funding councils, researchers and experts.

### *Commonalities*

As much of what follows is devoted to issues common to both English and Scottish FHE collaborations, it might be worth saying just a little about what the two systems have in common and how they differ in their management of FE.

Under the 1992 Further nad Higher Education Acts HEIs in England and Scotland were brought together under national funding councils, the HEFCE for England and SHEFC for Scotland. In both countries FE colleges were incorporated and became captains of their own fate and in both countries funding is linked to some form of external accountability.

In each country and each sector institutions seeking funding are required to develop a strategic plan which in theory allows them to build on their individual strengths, develop their own mission and create a unique identity, albeit within guidelines.

In both countries and in both sectors there is a tremendous diversity, ranging from the large multi-faculty/department comprehensive establishment, to the monotechnic. There are also differences in mission. Some FE colleges see themselves as becoming HE establishments. Others see themselves as establishing a core of HE work which supports the local community and is not provided elsewhere, and yet others are concerned with increasing access to and participation in higher education for those in their local communities who would otherwise not have such opportunities.

There are similar differences in HEIs and their missions. Some HEIs (e.g. Lancashire, Glasgow Caledonian) have large programmes. Others tend to be reactive. Some have no intention of becoming extensively involved in HE/FE collaborative working.

Another common feature of the two countries is the difference in culture between and within the two sectors.

Broadly the differences are:

- in mission;
- in role of students;
- in conditions and terms of employment;
- in roles and structures, particularly where the same terminology is used; and
- actual or perceived clashes between the requirements of vocational qualifications (SCOTVEC, BTEC and NVQ) and degree level work.

There are however also real differences in the two systems:

## *Differences*

**Funding and quality assurance**: Briefly, in England funding follows the student, and in Scotland the institution. In England HE in FE is largely funded via the Higher Education Funding Council, or on a fees only basis. In the first instance funding may either be to the HEI which then passes on some of its intake to FE colleges, or more rarely, HE courses will be funded in FE colleges in their own right. Quality assurance for HE in FE is largely carried out by the HEFCE and is not comprehensive. Visits will only normally be paid to provision which claims excellence or may be considered at risk.

The saga of fees only students, the reduction in fees, and the recent regulations governing the award of mandatory grants are too familiar to need adumbration.

In Scotland, SHEFC funds HE in HEIs and the Scottish Office funds all provision of whatever level in FEIs. No distinction in funding terms is drawn between FE courses and HE courses in FEIs. The SHEFC is by and large responsible for quality assurance in HEIs. The Scottish Office has retained HMIs who inspect provision in FEIs.

**The FE/HE divide and the nature of provision:** The Scottish Vocational and Educational Council's (SCOTVEC) framework and Higher National awards are crucial to HE/FE collaborative working. The most frequent form of collaborative working builds on an Higher National programme in which an FEI is validated to teach in its own right through the SCOTVEC system. Students can then in theory claim a general credit from that course and seek to obtain the appropriate exemptions and entry into a degree course. Frequently, however, HEIs will require that Higher National students undertake additional enhancement studies to fit them for specific degrees either in order to ensure their experience and learning matches the programme they wish to join, or to give agreed exemptions. These enhancement courses are frequently linked to guaranteed places.

Franchised Higher Nationals are an exception in Scotland. There has to be a specific resource, staff or other reasons for an FEI to prefer to have its Higher National mediated by an HEI rather than being directly validated to deliver it.

There are a couple of consequences of this that we, south of the border, should note:

- there is an established and significant body of teachers within Scottish FEIs with experience of initiating, teaching, validating, assessing work etc. at first and second level;
- a university's involvement in the validation of HE in FE colleges is largely confined to the validation of enhancement elements, or the validation of top years for degree or honours degree work.

Other forms of FHE collaboration do exist, including joint working, franchising and validation. It is unusual for only one type to exist in one institution.

Another distinctive feature of Scottish FHE provision is that the multiple franchising of courses from more than one HEI is virtually non-existent. Even those colleges that do franchise from more than one HEI tend to have a franchiser of first resort.

It is possible that the framework provided by SCOTVE SQMS (Scottish Quality Management System) and the greater volume of autonomous HE in FE, together with a much simpler and less stressed funding situation, has led to fewer tensions and encouraged more openness and peer working than may be the case south of the border. However, in both countries collaborative links have emerged on a bottom-up and pragmatic basis and it would be misleading to give the impression of a total unified and problem free system in Scotland. There is the same diversity in practice which all have noticed as each partnership has in some sense sought to reinvent the wheel.

Despite these differences there was a remarkable unanimity among those to whom we spoke about what constituted good management of the various stages of an FE partnership. What follows emphasises the common ground and the good practice. Similarly it does not distinguish between types of working. There are creative and even necessary tensions between FE colleges and HEIs. A market emphasis demands at least competitive tensions which, some would argue, are inimical to

good constructive and collaborative working within and between sectors.

## *Initiation and development*

There was a high degree of agreement as to what now constituted good practice in the development of schemes. FEIs and HEIs were commended not only on their own practice and experience of collaborative working, but on the lessons they had learnt and desirable changes that had taken place.

There was general agreement that if partnerships were working well at the planning and development stages, there should be few predictable surprises at validation, and in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of an arrangement. Quality assurance must therefore constitute an integral part of the planning and initiation stage and not be an add on, an afterthought.

Any proposal for a collaborative programme must be embedded in the mission statements or development plans of the partners. Collaborating institutions should be aware of the intended roles of the proposal in the overall provision and development strategy of those with whom they were working.

A clear understanding of the requirements of the students for whom the proposed programme is being developed is essential. This involves the identification of the learning and support needs of such students.

It is important for both institutions that, as the proposed programme is developed, it is embedded in the academic, financial and management structures of all partners to avoid marginalisation. Wherever possible existing systems should be adapted to suit the needs of the collaborative programme.

Resource and academic issues need to be considered conjointly so that the integrity of the proposal as a whole can be established.

Opportunities should be provided for ensuring that all those with responsibility for planning, delivering, assessing and reviewing the programme are systematically informed and updated on the strategic and operational context in which the programme will operate.

The period when a proposal is being initiated and developed is a formative one for everybody involved. The creation of appropriate participative arrangements between academic, management, faculty and other teams at this stage underpins quality. Wherever possible a balance of qualified staff from all partners in the initiation of programmes is preferable. The precise mix will vary with circumstances. The planning and initiation development stage of a proposal should address operational as well as academic and strategic issues. The involvement of external examiners and other external advisors in the early stages of an agreement, either for the contribution they can make or for their judgement or advice, is a strong feature of many schemes.

Informal arrangements need to be documented and underpinned by a formal framework but not stifled by it.

Agreements and memoranda of association should recognise that each institution shares responsibility and accountability for the provision, and that each is answerable to the other for their agreed role within the collaborative programme. Articles of association must specify arrangements for the termination of agreements, safeguarding the interests of students, copyright and intellectual property.

## *Validation or approval?*

Validation events are more than summative assessments to record and accredit an agreement or programme. If well conducted they are formative events which add new dimension to the programmes they address. Their comments and the adjustments that sometimes follow safeguard and enhance the quality and standards of the programme.

If the preparatory stages of collaborative schemes have been appropriately carried through there should be few surprises at recognition or at validation. Recognition or validation is concerned with the verification of these arrangements and ensuring their transparency, and subjecting them to the critical scrutiny of those who had not been involved in advising or participating in the development of the programme.

The focus of validation events must be the student experience. Given the extra difficulties in

managing schemes involving more than one institution, validation teams should not take the executive arrangements for granted. The recognition and validation process should draw on the advice and comments of experts and recognition and validation should explore the way in which the scheme will be operationalised and managed within and between institutions.

There were various ways in which colleges have gone about ensuring that the proposals agreed in their name are appropriate. Some have used formal paper-based systems derived from the CNAA. Others have tended to use more informal systems, backed up by executive, committee and reporting structures. In each instance, however, the central questions for both the FEI and the HEI was whether the validation event established that the programme could be delivered at an appropriate level.

Validation teams should pay particular attention to the publicity and information given to students. They should seek to probe the quality and efficacy of the information given to students prior to enrolment and the expectations that students are encouraged to develop, particularly where they are required to transfer from an FEI to an HEI to complete their courses.

Validation teams should seek to test the robustness of the proposed quality assurance strategies, paying particular attention to mechanisms for feedback strategies and mechanisms for ensuring that the comments of external examiners and annual periodic reviews are acted upon. The team should probe the relationship between the staff and students at the FEI and the HEI. The recognition and validation process is strengthened by the inclusion of persons with a general knowledge of F/HE collaborative working. As far as possible, the institutions should avoid including staff who have been responsible for initiating or implementing the programme as validators or members of major review teams.

It was generally felt that validation teams needed to pay particular attention to support offered by HEIs to the FE colleges. Some HEIs had spent considerable time in developing co-ordinators, students and academic advisors, and introduced mentors and in some instances reciprocal secondments.

Some HEI staff felt that unless this was explored the full cost of collaborative working, both to the HEI in staff and in other terms, might not be understood. In particular, they felt it important to test whether sufficient time, resources and recognition had been allowed for the administrative and academic loads involved in collaborative working.

## *Implementation*

Again, there was general agreement that providing the earlier stages of programme initiation, validation and approval had been carried out with care, a framework should have been created for the responsible and flexible implementation of the programme itself. There should be a series of major and minor points at which the implementation of the course could be tested against the intention for it.

FEIs and HEIs held that those teaching on a scheme should take part in its administration, curriculum development and assessment as fully as possible. To this end many HEIs have gone to great lengths to ensure that FE staff be included in appropriate committees in relation to the course, and that they were invited to take part in staff development events and seminars.

Some colleagues noted that the workloads and heavier teaching loads characteristic of FE colleges frequently precluded FE staff from participating in these events.

While students on partnership programmes were registered as students of the university, in practice there were several problems in making university facilities accessible to them. Students tended to identify with their FE colleges, and were not able to say what being an HEI registered student meant to them in detail.

Generally, all HEIs had one person, variously titled, with responsibility for supporting HE students in their franchised FE college. These individuals approached their role somewhat differently even within the same partnership. There is some need to support these individuals in terms of an agreed and operational job description, and in recognising the load they carry.

Differences in culture and practice occasionally lead to unnecessary complications. Time spent inducting staff into the modus operandi of the institutions with which they are working, differences in teaching methods and learning resources and expectations would ensure smooth operation. In those institutions which had negotiated associate college and/or consortia agreements, support mechanisms to deal with these problems had been or were being developed.

There were several instances in which FEIs and HEIs had co-operated in the production of teaching and laboratory materials and in deciding the form and nature of assessment. This close peer working was thought to underpin quality and ensure a uniformity of standard.

In Scotland in particular HEIs and FEIs valued peer working. Both recognised that it contributed to efficient and effective course management, curriculum development, teaching and the overall proper operation of the agreement. For the university it ensured ready access to aspects of the way in which the partnership was developing which a more formal system would have precluded. Above all, they believed it established an openness of working which meant that issues could be aired and shared, and frequently resolved or refined before they appeared on a formal agenda.

It was generally agreed that the management of courses requires a cycle of meetings, frequently at the FE college, in which teachers and other officials met to review the programme and monitor its progress.

An HEI's responsibility for ensuring standards does not mean that FE colleagues cannot be called on in helping it discharge its responsibilities.

Inter-institutional arrangements can be time consuming particularly for those responsible for implementation and budgeting. The universities of the West of England, Central Lancashire and Strathclyde are some of the examples of this.

Many students talked warmly of the opportunity that taking a franchised course had given them. Some gave vivid accounts of the value that courses had added to their quality of life, their zest for living and their career objectives. Sometimes, however, they complained of remoteness, and particularly the lack of comment on assessed work, and the time it took to return work if it needed to be moderated of marked by the HEI.

In general, a more facilitative stance adopted by most HEIs in the way they conducted business with their partners has produced a cordial atmosphere which underpins increases in the effectiveness of the formal arrangements for quality assurance. More distant hands-off approaches were generally seen as less effective. Above all, implementation needs to be managed. This requires:

- that FE and HE colleges develop appropriate mechanisms for ensuring that agreements are delivered, staff are properly inducted and briefed, and implementation is monitored;
- that collaborative programmes are integrated into the mainstream academic structures of all partners and not marginalised; and
- that a consistency of approach is preserved within and between institutions.

## *Quality a: ance*

HEIs and FEIs are both developing their quality assurance mechanisms in part to meet the demands of the changed funding and national quality requirements consequent upon 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Those HEIs that had received HEQC audits had learnt from the experience and the comments of auditors who are themselves senior and distinguished academics, academic managers and administrators.

Within this framework FE colleges are currently reviewing and consolidating quality assurance procedures which involve periodic course reviews, academic management structures and practices which underpin these with college-wide committees responsible for the process and follow-up of quality assurance activities: There is, of course, a diversity of approach. Many Scottish FE colleges have accepted the Scottish Quality Management System (which has been pioneered by Scottish Enterprise) together with total quality management, Investors in People, or BS5750 approaches, all of which are said to be compatible with SQMS. Several HEIs have helped FE colleges in developing their quality systems. It has not,

however, been a one-way trade. Audit reports point to the importance of HEIs learning from FE colleges. Once again there is no preferred model.

In all the partnerships we examined there is a cycle of executive meetings in which all contributors are expected to take part. In the best practice, these are formative as well as summative for they frequently generate solutions to the problems placed before them, or which they detect. Typically a partnership will submit an annual report which comments on the admission and progression features, the standards achieved as confirmed by external examiners, and other issues which have been raised by staff and students throughout the year. An opportunity will be taken to look at the effective operation of the agreement as a whole. The annual review is usually supported by scheduled events during the year in which the progress of the programme is reviewed. FEIs and HEIs will conduct major reviews of programmes on a five year basis. However, in the early stages of collaborative working, such reviews may be required earlier by one or other of the parties.

Quality systems require adequate access to appropriate data for course tutors, and in some instances it was felt that more work needed to be undertaken in making such data more widely accessible.

Audit reports and our own studies show that problems can arise if clear decisions have not been taken about, for example, what happens to, and who should see, review reports and annual reviews. It is important that results of these reviews are available to all those concerned with the programme in both institutions. Mechanisms for discussion, acting upon and ensuring that appropriate procedures and actions have been taken are essential.

Where an associate college, consortium or similar agreement exists, some of the issues surrounding quality assurance can be dealt with regularly on an institution or group-wide basis. Here it is important to ensure that there is a separation between those issues appropriate to the general institutional agreement and those which are specific to the particular programme. It is also important to ensure that the processes of both mesh.

Multiple franchising was felt to pose particular problems. There are many reasons why FEIs franchise from more than one institution. A greater responsibility is placed on all concerned, and particularly the FE college, to ensure that:

- franchising as a whole is underpinned by an appropriate management and quality system;
- programmes franchised from different HEIs are validated, implemented, assessed and monitored according to the requirements of the particular agreement;
- students are aware of their position in relation to 'their' HEI.

In the best practice it was felt that the results of the quality assurance process must be fed back to those to whom it was applied. Action points should be identified, and proper mechanisms used to ensure follow-up on issues identified as requiring attention, with reports to all those concerned or affected by them. The programme team needed to own the quality assurance process and see it as an integral component of delivery of the scheme. This required that management fed back to the course team how it had tackled quality problems which stemmed from institutional arrangements over which the course team had little control.

Probably the most important guarantee of quality in Scottish collaborative working is the extensive experience that FEIs already have of HND work. Mechanisms and understandings are thus present which are not matched to the same extent south of the border where HE in FE has not played such a prominent part.

One of the principle guarantors of quality was seen as being the external scrutiny or double marking of assessed work. FE staff talked of the usefulness of discussing their marks and assessment practice with their HE colleagues. This was felt to be a way in which they quickly gained confidence in their competence and a deeper understanding of the requirements of HE work.

In some partnerships internal university staff acted as moderators, particularly for the early years of validated degrees or the enhanced modules of HND/HNC programmes. Some FE and HE institutions felt that there was some advantage in appointing at least one examiner external to the partnership, preferably an individual with

experience of both the subject to be examined and of collaborative working.

Finally, HEIs felt that is was important to address issues of quality assurance in reviewing internal procedures. There were occasions when the additional complexity of arrangements which are necessarily associated with cross-institutional working suggests ways in which the internal system of an HEI needs amendment, codification or simplification.

The research has identified general points which colleagues made when discussing collaborative working. They are the product of their own experience, the constructive lessons they have learnt from what has been a pioneering exercise. They reflect intentions as well as actualities, since the critical review embedded in all established courses inevitably throws up issues which need to be addressed as well as those matters requiring celebration. However, much in what we saw should be celebrated. There is a solid base of diverse experience on which to draw.

If I were to pick out five general themes which require further attention they would be these:

- more attention needs to be paid at all stages to the routine definition, management and monitoring of executive roles;
- staff development to ensure that all those who participate in collaborative schemes are aware of relevant differences in culture;
- more work needs to be undertaken, particularly south of the border, on defining precisely what criteria are necessary to ensure quality at various levels. Do you really need to be a Nobel Prize winner to teach at foundation level? Can just any FE teacher be competent at second year level merely because there is a hole in their timetable?
- active management, monitoring of process and the sharing of information, thus reducing the cost and the inconvenience of big-bang reviews and making them more effective;
- the voluntary and statutory bodies concerned with upholding professional standards of practice and the knowledge that supports it are focusing on building in and ensuring the effectiveness of QA as part of the normal process of delivery as opposed to an annual or quinquennial imposition. This is felt both to increase a sense of ownership and help front line teachers in front line management.

# Current developments in FE: implications for quality assurance at the FE/HE interface

*Terry Melia CBE, Chief Inspector, Further Education Funding Council*

## Introduction

This contribution explores quality assurance arrangements in the further and higher education sectors in England and the scope for applying these different arrangements at the FE/HE interface where franchised higher education work in further education institutions, further education offered by higher education institutions and part-time higher education provision in the further education sector blur the institutional and sector boundaries.

## Quality assessment and audit in higher education

Quality assurance has a long history in higher education, particularly in those institutions such as the polytechnics which grew up under the tutelage of local education authorities. Early forms of quality assurance centred around the course approval system in which Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) were involved in a quasi-administrative function. Although mainly concerned with the reviewing of new course provision decisions by the regional staff. inspectors on course approval had a quality and standards dimension as well through the input of specialist HMI to these decisions.

Later the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was established and through its institutional visits, its validation of individual courses, its manifold daily contact with higher education teachers and its reliance on peer review was enabled to establish quickly its own reputation as the guardian of standards in public sector HE.

Following the establishment of the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) and the thrust to link funding and quality, HMI re-established its role as a major player in the higher education quality assurance arrangements through its contribution to the funding/quality debate and its involvement in funding decisions based on HMI's views of the quality of provision. The latter views were based on a comprehensive programme of inspection and reporting on higher education institutions.

The methods underpinning HMI inspection of higher education were outlined in a paper, **In pursuit of quality: an HMI view**, which was presented and debated at an invitation conference held by HMI at Heythrop Park, Oxfordshire in 1989 and attended by all the principal players including university vice chancellors, polytechnic directors, college principals, funding council officials and senior HMI.

Following the demise of HMI and the CNAA in 1992 new quality assurance arrangements were established in higher education in England. These were based on quality audits carried out by a newly constituted body, the Higher Education Quality Council, owned by the higher education sector institutions. Additionally, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) carried out its own quality assessment of provision funded by it. Because higher education institutions, particularly the older universities, feared that any form of audit or assessment which they did not run and control could threaten their autonomy and academic freedom they were suspicious of externally imposed quality assurance arrangements. This is in spite of the fact that they are the recipients of vast sums of public money which they persistently claim is insufficient to enable them to fulfil their missions. Certainly their reluctance to open their doors to inspection has led them to being saddled with a two-pronged audit and assessment regime which to both insiders and outsiders appears bureaucratic and burdensome.

## Quality assurance in further education

Quality assurance in further education is relatively new, although the sector has always been subject

to inspection by HMI. The primary responsibility for the quality of each further education college's work rests with the college itself. This point was made clear in the White Paper **Education and training for the 21st century** (DES *et al.* 1991) which also identified two other components of quality assurance in further education:

- the role of examining and validating bodies in guaranteeing the standards of qualifications; and

- the role of external assessors in making independent judgements of quality.

The Further Education Funding Council's role in quality assessment arises from a requirement in the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) that the Council shall:

- ensure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided by institutions within the further education sector; and

- establish a committee to be known as the Quality Assessment Committee to advise the Council on quality issues.

The Council decided to fulfil its responsibility with respect to quality assessment using two approaches:

- the collection and comparison of performance indicators for the colleges in the sector; and

- the inspection of colleges and of other work funded by the Council, by its own inspectorate.

The Council has worked with the sector to develop a small number of performance indicators relating to key areas of college activity including growth in enrolments, student retention rates, students' achievements and cost efficiency. The Council's inspection arrangements are described in the next section.

As part of the governments's charter initiative, which is aimed at raising standards and improving quality throughout the public services, the Department for Education issued the **Charter for further education** in 1993. The charter informs users of what they have a right to expect from colleges such as handling enquiries, admissions, guidance and support; equal opportunities; teaching quality; publication of examination results and other information about the colleges; and complaints procedures. Colleges were required to produce their own charters by September 1994.

## Inspection

The further education inspectorate comprises a chief inspector, 12 senior inspectors and 60 full-time inspectors. In addition, some 600 part-time inspectors have been recruited, trained and registered, and part-time inspectors contribute 27 full-time equivalent posts to the inspectorate's staffing establishment. The intention is that over 1,000 part-time inspectors should be trained and registered by the end of 1995. Full-time inspectors are home-based and are assigned to both regional and curriculum teams led by a senior inspector. There are nine regional teams and 10 curriculum area teams corresponding to the Council's nine regions and 10 programme areas.

The inspectorate's work is steered by a quality assessment committee with the following terms of reference:

- to advise the Council on the qual y of education provided:

i in institutions within the sector,

ii in institutions for whose activities the Council provides, or is considering providing, financial support (in which respect, it will be necessary to have regard to advice from LEAs, the Office of HM Chief Inspector of Schools and the Higher Education Funding Council for England);

- to recommend to the Council and keep under review the method for assessing quality;

- to receive assessment reports on the quality of education and advise on any necessary action;

- to report annually to the Council, including an evaluation of the overall quality of education in the sector;

- to advise on other matters as requested from time to time by the Council.

The Quality Assessment Committee has a membership of 12 with representatives from colleges, industry, commerce and students.

The inspectorate's main work document is the framework for inspection **Assessing achievement** (FEFC 1993). It was devised by a group of college representatives and others with an interest in the sector and was chaired by the chief inspector. It has proved to be sufficiently flexible to deal with the diversity of institutions in the sector and the working methods it describes have been accepted widely by colleges. The main features of the inspectorate's current working methods are described below.

## Inspection principles

The following broad principles guide all inspection activity:

- inspections are planned in consultation with the college and reflect its pattern of provision;

- the college's own aims, objectives, targets and criteria for success set the context for inspections;

- the inspection process includes direct observation of the delivery of the curriculum monitoring the college's performance against the commitments in the national charter for further education and the college's own charter, and evaluating the college's strategy for monitoring and enhancing the quality of its own provision.

## Types of inspection

The inspection cycle for each college covers four years. Within the four-year cycle there are three types of inspection;

- by the college inspector for routine monitoring of the college's activities and responses to earlier inspections;

- by specialist inspectors, working singly or in small teams and concentrating on particular areas of the curriculum or specific cross-college issues;

- by inspection teams which clarify, supplement and update the information gathered through the four-year cycle.

The first two types of inspection do not lead to published reports: a written note of the main conclusions is sent to the college. The third type of inspection leads to a published report.

One-third of specialist inspections have been carried out by part-time registered inspectors of whom the majority are practitioners within the education sector. About 20 per cent of part-time contracts are awarded to inspectors who have relevant subject expertise but do not normally work within education. These lay inspectors bring an important knowledge of industry and commerce and of the needs of employers to inspection teams.

All inspection teams include a nominee from the staff of the college being inspected. They are offered preparatory training for their role and become full members of college inspection teams. Nominees may accompany inspectors during observation of lessons or interviews with college staff. They also attend inspectors' meetings and contribute to discussions arising from inspection. The inclusion of college representatives in inspection teams supports the inspectorate's wish to operate openly. It has been well received by college managers as a means of enhancing the efficiency of inspections.

## Inspection grades

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect and summarise their judgements on the balance between strengths and weaknesses using a five-point scale:

- grade 1: provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses;

- grade 2: provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses;

- grade 3: provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses;
- grade 4: provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths;
- grade 5: provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.

Inspection grades represent the collective judgements of all those involved. Initial assessments arrived at by individual inspectors are subject to moderation throughout the inspection process.

## Quadrennial college inspections

Quadrennial college inspections draw on evidence collected through the four-year cycle and, in particular, on recent specialist assessments of programme areas. The process culminates in a visit by a team made up of full-time and registered part-time inspectors, including at least one with recent experience outside the world of education. The college contributes to the process by:

- providing a self-assessment report which sets out its own views of its major strengths and weaknesses;
- nominating a senior member of staff to join the inspection team and take part in all aspects of the inspection apart from grading;
- evaluating the inspection process.

## Reporting and follow-up

Inspectors provide feedback on their initial assessments to teachers, course leaders and college managers while the inspection is in progress. In the period following the team inspection, a verbal report of the main inspection findings is provided for representatives of the college's senior management and governors who may use this opportunity to correct any errors of fact. This marks the end of the formal inspection. As soon as it is available, and normally eight working weeks after feedback to governors, a printer's proof of the report is sent in confidence to the principal and to the chairman of governors. The final version is normally published within a further two weeks, when the college receives 100 copies and the report is distributed to the sector and to the media.

College inspection reports set out the inspection team's judgements of the strengths and weaknesses of the following aspects of the college under the following broad headings:

- responsiveness and range of provision;
- governance and management;
- students' recruitment, guidance and support;
- teaching and the promotion of learning;
- students' achievements;
- quality assurance;
- resources (including staffing, equipment and learning resources, and accommodation).

**Assessing achievement** (FEFC 1993) provides details of the issues covered under each of these headings, and guidelines on good practice.

All reports include a one-page summary of the main conclusions arising from the inspection and the grades awarded. Grades are recorded for cross-college aspects of provision, and for each of the major programme areas inspected. In most cases, a grade is assigned to each of the Council's programme areas in which the college has a substantial amount of work. In exceptional cases, where it is justified by student numbers, two or three groups of subjects within a programme area may be graded.

Within four months of publication of the report, colleges are required to provide a written response to the Council outlining plans for addressing weaknesses identified in the report. Colleges are also asked to incorporate their proposals in their strategic plans. Inspectors monitor the responses to inspection reports and the action colleges take in the light of inspection findings. Programme areas which were graded 4 or 5 during the period before the 1994 funding round will be re-inspected in time for the 1995 round. Brief reports of all these inspections have been published in a single document.

## Evaluation of inspections

The inspectorate has adopted procedures to evaluate the inspection process and enhance its own performance. These include:

- a national programme of training for part-time registered inspectors and college nominees who join inspection teams;
- the moderation of grades by the chief inspector, college inspection teams and regional and specialist teams of inspectors;
- the central analysis of inspection evidence;
- the provision of opportunities for inspectors to work outside their home region with other teams;
- the establishment of a central unit for editing reports to ensure a uniform of style;
- a working methods review group.

The inspectorate has been concerned from the outset to achieve consistent practice. An early focus of attention has been the relative performance of full-time and part-time registered inspectors.

## Inspection developments

The inspectorate's main working document **Assessing achievement** (FEFC 1993) is kept under constant review, with changes to the framework for inspection as the need arises. The following developments occurred in 1993/4:

- the single inspection grade for 'resources' has now been replaced by three grades, one each for staffing, equipment and accommodation;
- the format for the summary page of published reports has been revised to help colleges meet their obligations under the **Charter for further education** (DFE 1993) to provide a summary of inspection reports for progressive students;
- a commitment has been made to include performance indicators in published reports when a standard set of indicators is agreed by the Council in consultation with the sector;
- a printer's proof copy of each inspection report is sent in confidence to the principal and chair of governors of the college concerned. This normally occurs eight working weeks after the presentation of inspection findings to college governors. The final printed version is normally distributed after a further two weeks;
- it has been affirmed that inspection grades represent the collective judgements of all those involved in inspection. Initial assessments arrived at by individuals are subject to moderation throughout the inspection process;
- in most inspections a grade will be assigned to each of the Council's programme areas in which the college has a substantial amount of work. Only in exceptional cases, where it is justified by student numbers, will grades be assigned to two or three subjects within a programme area;
- a commitment has been made that any curriculum areas graded 4 or 5 during the period before the 1994 funding round will be re-inspected in time for the 1995 round.

Colleges also need to improve the opportunities for students to engage in extra curricular activities and do more to foster adult participation in further education. The sector is inadequately accommodated and has been for so long that expectations have been lowered. This poses a challenge to both colleges and the Council to develop capital-raising schemes to fund the major and minor building programmes that the sector so desperately needs if it is to play a full-time part in enabling this country not only to meet the national education and training targets but to develop the talents and abilities of its citizens to the full.

The main challenges to the new further education inspectorate are:

- to ensure uniformity of inspection practices across the country in order to gain and retain the confidence of the sector which it inspects and of the public at large;

- to help colleges establish their own rigorous internal quality control and ultimately sector-wide quality assurance arrangements;

- to enhance the quality of provision and raise the standard of student achievements is reflected in both student retention rates and examination successes.

## Inspection at the FE/HE interface

Inspection at the FE/HE interface involves the following provision:

- prescribed HE offered by FE colleges;
- non-prescribed HE offered by FE colleges;
- schedule 2 provision made by HE institutions;
- franchised HE.

The Council's inspectorate has an interest in work which it funds but which is carried out in institutions outside the sector. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the local education authorities both fund some work in sector colleges: HEFCE assessors and inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) have an interest in the quality of this work. The Council has made a commitment to the Secretary of State to consult and work with these bodies to maintain the quality of further education in all sectors and to ensure consistency of inspection standards.

Prescribed HE in the FE institutions is assessed by HEFCE quality assessors using their three-point grading scale. Attempts are made to carry out these assessments at the time the FEFC inspectorate is undertaking the institutional quadrennial inspection. When this is not possible the HEFCE keeps both the chief inspector and the college inspector informed of its arrangements and findings.

Franchised HE in FE institutions is assessed by HEFCE quality assessors through the higher education institution accrediting and franchising the work. Again, the HEFCE will keep the chief inspector of the FEFC and the college inspector informed of the arrangements and findings.

Non-prescribed HE in FE institutions is assessed by the FE inspectorate using its five-point grading scale. The HEFCE is invited to nominate a HE quality assessor, trained in the use of **Assessing achievement** (FEFC 1993) to join the FEFC inspection team where there is a substantial volume of non-prescribed HE work.

FE in HE institutions is assessed by the FEFC inspectorate using its five-point grading scale. Attempts are made to carry out inspections to coincide with HE quality assessment visits. When this is not possible the HEFCE is kept informed of the FEFC inspectorate's arrangements and findings. The FEFC inspectorate will also draw on HEQC reports on a HE institution to inform its judgements on management and academic audit systems.

Each council has agreed to provide inspectors/ assessors with training in the use of each other's assessment frameworks.

## The future

Inspection in FE has been well received by colleges and others concerned with the sector. The inspectorate will now need to work hard to retain the confidence of not only sector colleges, but also government and the public at large and to assure both further and higher education institutions that the arrangements for inspecting at the FE/HE interface are valid and workable.

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# Quality: Building it in and checking it out (who shares wins)

*Chris Chapman, Business & Technology Education Council*

## Focus

This perspective on the FE/HE interface is very much coloured by a background in further education and close involvement with current developments in that sector.

The original rather grand and apparently authoritative title, **Assurance and control – the knack of managing the difference**, begged so many questions that we could well have spent the hour determining what is meant by assurance and by control, never mind the knack of managing the difference. Furthermore, John Hilbourne has suggested that 'a lot of nonsense is talked about quality assurance!'. As an alternative, it might be interesting and no doubt informative, to discuss the apparent 'obsession with making judgements' or to explore ways of 'landscaping the educational garden'. But again, such titles don't get to the heart of the matter.

The phrase, 'Quality – building it in and checking it out', is borrowed from BTEC's quality assurance and control handbook. It captures in plain English the essence of what I want to say. Quality is there by design and it needs to be monitored against the design specifications.

'Who shares wins' is borrowed from an FEU paper on partnerships which in turn probably alludes to Peter Savage's book **Who cares wins** – a book about 'how to unlock the hidden potential of people at work ... and turn ordinary companies into winners'. The clear implication, as Mike Abramson has confirmed, is that a collaborative partnership in quality assurance brings success.

My twin themes are transparently simple:

- quality by design;
- let's work together.

## Change

We assume, at our peril, that others keep still while we move forward. The education and training environment has changed and is changing in so many ways, most, if not all of which, have an impact on our perception and our judgement of quality. We are moving rapidly to centrally determined standards and curricula – from differentiated product to commodity – with, apparently, less opportunity to respond to local need. At the same time, the focus has moved from groups to individuals, and from courses leading to qualifications to qualifications achieved via (one of) a number of different routes – one or more of which might cross the FE/HE boundary.

Quality is about change; it is about moving forward. It is not about stability. We need to challenge, not to defend. Indeed, allowing things to evolve is frequently thought to be, and can be good, yet by its very nature, evolution also leads to catastrophe or extinction. Revolution can be a faster route to both!

## The FE/HE interface

Collaboration at the FE/HE interface can relate to shared delivery of degree and non-degree provision; it can be about progression to and within higher education; or it might be about collaboration nationally or locally in the development of, for example, Higher National Diploma programmes or General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). The latter is an area of development with major implications for both sectors – perhaps far more so than is immediately apparent.

Having established the national framework for vocational qualifications and introduced GNVQs at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) now has a remit from the Secretary of State for Education to assess the feasibility of introducing higher level GNVQs – this must impact on current provision at the FE/HE interface. A consultative document is currently being prepared through a limited consultation process. If introduced, higher level GNVQs might be designed to:

- underpin NVQs;
- replace much of non-degree provision in higher education (whither associate degrees and HNDs?);
- provide greater flexibility in delivery patterns;
- facilitate alignments and credit transfer between NVQs, GNVQs and degree programmes (a real education 'ecu');
- facilitate progression from Advanced GNVQs.

The consultation will throw the spotlight on structure, on standards, on awarding arrangements, on assessment, on the areas to be developed, and on the relationships with other higher level qualifications. It is also likely to address issues of funding, delivery and entry thresholds. In responding to the consultative document, we will need to consider whether there should be GNVQs at higher levels at all. Whether, if they were introduced, the standards should be equivalent, for example, to two years of a degree programme. Should level 5 be equivalent to a course-based MSc? To what extent, and in what way, could or should the size and scope of units for higher level GNVQs be aligned with any emerging common model for modular degrees, to facilitate credit transfer? Could they sensibly provide a real bridge between the CAT system and competence-based NVQ units? Should there be an element of externality in the assessment regime and snould work experience form an essential part of the programme? What about meeting local needs?

There will be much to challenge current practice and provision at the FE/HE interface.

## Recognising quality

One of the interesting and refreshing changes in the education environment is the level of public debate (both on education and on quality), some of which is well informed, some less so. The noise level in this area is high and perceptions of quality can be contradictory. During 1994 many young people passed their GCE A level examinations and the immediate popular reaction was that standards must be falling. A rather smaller proportion of the initial group of GNVQ students were awarded an Advanced GNVQ – the vocational A level – yet the conclusion was the same – standards and quality must be poor. All this begs a question as to which way the various indicators point. What do they tell us? How should we use them?

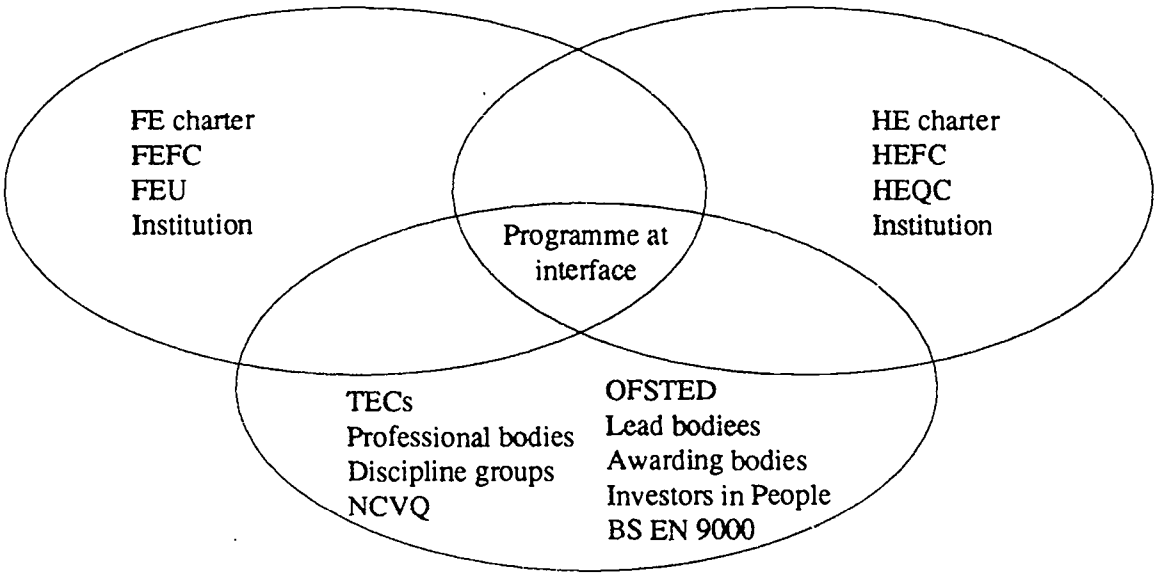
There are, of course, many different perspectives on quality. If we define it as 'fit for purpose' we must ask the question 'what purpose?'. To meet needs of industry? To fit students for work and life? To meet targets? For payment? To make awards?

The Further Education Funding Council **Circular 93/28** (FEFC 1993) talks about developing a distinctive approach to quality and its assessment in FE, which recognises that provision must not only be fit for its purpose but should aim for high standards and excellence, should satisfy and involve the customer, should encourage continual improvement and should enable the government to be assured that the large sums of money devoted to this sector of education, are being well spent. Most of us would happily subscribe to the same formula. Each would conclude with a statement related to their own purpose. But who are our fellow travellers? Is there harmony or cacophony? (See **Figure 1.**)

Looked at from the perspective of the FE/HE interface there are many, apparently disparate, organisations and requirements. There is an urgent need to soften the rigid boxes and to look at the whole system – analysing parts or making judgements in isolation without reference to others involved, can lead to false impressions. We should work together. At present, we don't.

Fortunately, there is some movement in this direction and toward common criteria against which judgements can be made. NCVQ, the vocational awarding bodies and others have been working on a quality (design) framework for GNVQs. It is being finalised for publication in the October 1994 and although not yet fully committed to the framework, both FEFC and OFSTED have also been involved. Is it possible, therefore, that in the not too distant future, all those with a responsibility for quality in GNVQs will work from a common set of quality criteria? Will they sing in

**Figure 1: Harmony or cacophony?**




harmony from the same song sheet about planning and development, about implementation and monitoring, about assuring standards and quality review?

The Business and Technology Education Council currently works to a 'quality model' which might well have application more widely. It emphasises where responsibility lies, it emphasises partnership at all levels, including those involved in making external judgements. Essentially, BTEC's quality assurance processes are designed to ensure that the quality and credibility of qualifications that BTEC awards are maintained through a system which places responsibility for quality with the deliverer – that is, where it happens. The expectation is that:

- a process is established whereby BTEC and deliverers (working together) can ensure a cost effective quality assurance process;
- deliverers are empowered to and are able to take responsibility for quality assurance and control;
- the overall quality assurance process meets the requirements of stakeholders (e.g. NCVQ, lead bodies, government);
- the processes take account of what other 'auditors' in the field (HEQC, FEFC, OFSTED) are doing and are appropriate to the developmental stage of the customers;
- the overall quality assurance process ensures national standards and comparability of vocational awards.

Ultimately, it is about having confidence. Confidence that we have built our house well – that it is well designed and well constructed. Those of us who are involved with awarding qualifications need to be confident that those receiving an award have met all the requirements for that award. Others need to be confident that their particular requirements have been met, for example, to make payments or to set achievement against national targets. All these various agencies are, of course, mutually dependent upon one another.

## Partnerships

There are many benefits to be gained from working in partnership and many of these are already being realised at the FE/HE interface. Successful partnerships engender a sense of ownership in

design within which 'validation' is, effectively, an audit of prior preparation in delivery and in ensuring quality.

John Hilbourne's contribution has given an HEQC perspective on collaborative activities. What he had to say, not surprisingly, bears a strong resemblance to the guidelines published by the FEU (**Approaches to partnerships** 1994). The FEU rightly points to issues that need addressing in all partnership arrangements and provides a checklist of questions against four broad indicators, namely:

- partnerships, even speculative or informal ones, should have a clear rationale and identifiable aims;

- in any partnership, there is likely to be a combination of institutional self interest and mutual benefit. Before reaching a decision to collaborate or when reviewing a partnership, the costs and benefits of the proposed arrangement need to be weighed up. The decision need not be a simple yes or no but might be to set up a pilot phase to collaborate on a more limited basis to time limit the arrangement or to reconsider the possibility at a later date;

- partnerships make specific management demands because such arrangements are complex and the chain of accountability longer. Different institutions and agencies may have different approaches to management and different degrees of rigour;

- partnerships should be subject to equally rigorous standards of monitoring and quality assurance as other areas of the organisations work.

## Built-in quality

Edward de Bono, in his book **Parallel thinking** (1994), argues that judgement is about the past and about stability, whereas design (deciding what you want and building it in) is needed for change. A clear message about 'quality by design'.

In 1993 Scottish Enterprise initiated and funded the development of a Scottish Quality Management System (SQMS) to develop a harmonised quality management framework for vocational education and training in Scotland. It draws on and brings together quality criteria operated by key agencies – the English equivalents would be NCVQ, awarding bodies (including BTEC), TECs, the Employment Department and the DFE. It also relates to the quality assurance interests and requirements of BS5750 (BS EN 9000) and IIP – one yearns for such apparent harmony!

The knack, therefore, if there is one, of managing the difference between assurance and control probably lies in three things:

- being explicit about what kind of vision, what kind of expectation we have;

- establishing harmony (in the orchestral sense) – this includes stakeholders working together but, specifically, requires coherence in the feedback system so that we landscape rather than just weed the educational garden;

- removing our obsession with making judgements as an apparent end in itself – use judgement to determine whether a desired outcome is useful/valid – not as a way of getting the outcome.

The successful knowledge workers of the 21st century – the so-called 'gold-collar workers' – will be the product of an education and training system which has a vision, which knows where it is going and in which all parties collaborate willingly and effectively to achieve agreed learning goals and outcomes.

Prime responsibility for quality lies with the deliverers – in this case, at the interface. Together we must:

- maximise 'building it in'; and
- harmonise 'checking it out'.

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# Managing quality assurance in practice



## Progression from FE to HE: managing quality assurance where the baton is exchanged

*Mike Abramson, Head of Combined Honours and Partnership, University of Central Lancashire, Preston.*

### Introduction: the context of progression

In recent years FHE partnerships have expanded in both size and diversity, and, until recently, were considered to be the biggest growth industry in the post-compulsory sector. Although estimates vary, it is likely that over 30,000 students in the UK are undertaking courses developed by HEIs but delivered in the FE sector; the number of overseas students participating in partnership schemes is even more difficult to calculate, but this area has also witnessed significant expansion. Rationales for such initiatives are both many and varied, ranging from income generation to a mission-led desire to widen access to higher education for traditionally under-represented groups. FHE partnership are also both dynamic and evolving. Although the dominant form remains that of 'academic franchising', other, more mature forms of collaboration have emerged including the joint development and delivery of HE programmes, which harness the expertise of two or more institutions into an exciting synergy of association to create unique programmes of study. New forms of institutional relationship are also emerging, including 'associate college' status, based upon exclusive dealing.

Some partnerships schemes, such as those involving the delivery of access courses, HNC/Ds and other sub-degree programmes, enable students to complete their entire programme within their local FE college, and this is clearly what most students, especially part-time mature students, want. However, most FHE partnerships are still based upon the franchising of the lower/lowest levels of degree programmes, and whilst progression to higher levels of study within the franchiser HEI is normally guaranteed such guarantees are frequently undermined by geographical, personal and financial obstacles. Moreover, even when FE-based students do progress to the HEI, they are often traumatised by the sheer size and culture of the new organisation and by a self-perception that they are outsiders or second best.

Clearly, as the number of partnership students grow, so too does this problem of passing on the baton. Indeed, if a key rationale for FHE partnership is a belief that access to HE will be increased and widened by bringing the product closer to the customer, addressing the issue of academic progression becomes a central strategic and operational objective. How far, to date, has passing the baton meant passing the buck?

This contribution, therefore, seeks to explore the problems of progression and to forward possible solutions. It draws upon the findings of several national surveys and reports, but focuses on the operational and strategic experience of the Local

Integrated Colleges Scheme (LINCS). This extensive network of over 20 colleges in partnership with the University of Central Lancashire was the first franchise scheme of its kind in the UK, and its evolution can be seen as a mirror of subsequent partnership developments elsewhere. LINCS began in 1984, when 11 students were recruited to Nelson and Colne College to study two subjects from level one of the university's combined honours degree on a part-time evening basis. This mission-led programme still forms the mainstay of partnership enterprise, and now recruits almost 1,000 part-time students per year at 10 colleges in Lancashire and Cumbria. However, FHE franchises have also widened to embrace other academic areas, including HNC/Ds, year 0 and access provision, and the first stage of several other degrees. Other, more mature partnerships have also emerged, including collaborative courses, particularly with specialist colleges of agriculture and nursing. In two cases, the university plays a straight validation role for the higher education portfolio of two colleges in the region.

Some FE partners are geographically close to the university (the nearest within two miles) and for their students geographical progression is not a major issue, although it should be stressed that distance is not the only obstacle to progression. Other partner colleges in Cumbria, however, are both educationally and geographically isolated, with some being over 100 miles distant from the nearest HEI. Like other networks in Scotland, East Anglia and the South West, such isolation is a major barrier to educational opportunity and a key challenge for strategic planners. Clearly, franchising parts of HE programmes to isolated areas is a partial solution, but such initiatives also are part of the problem, since they whet appetites and increase expectations that cannot presently be fully met.

## Towards an effective framework for progression

To address the issues raised above requires a progression framework made up of the following key elements:

### *A high level of strategic planning*

Since HEIs normally bid to HEFCE on behalf of college partners such planning is clearly a necessary precursor to the funding process. It also forms part of the negotiations whereby students' needs and college ambitions are set against the overall strategic mission and regional provision of the partnership network as a whole.

It is also needed to ensure the parity of quality demanded by HEQC, and, by management of courses and subject targets, to guarantee academic progression to higher levels at the university. This enables HEI departments to accommodate projected college throughputs.

Longer-term strategic planning, formulated into three or five year partnership development plans, must also consider ways of extending college provision to higher academic levels, to reduce or even eliminate the need for geographical progression.

The three stage planning model adopted by the University of Central Lancashire is set out in **Figure 1**, and moves from the 'twinkle in the eyes' of grassroots enthusiasts through to annual and periodic review which, in turn, influences the response to subsequent college proposals. However, given that the highly competitive post-corporate world of FE generates much heat and friction, even the most sophisticated of planning mechanisms requires constant lubrication!

### *An academic information management system (AIMS)*

For any large partnership network an effective and user-friendly computerised student record system, accessible to FE partners as well as the host HEI, is an operational necessity. Primarily, it must be able to generate data on where students are studying, what they are studying and record their performance for assessment boards. It should also form the basis for cohort profiling (especially for initiatives dedicated to widening access), comparative performance analysis and for longer-term longitudinal studies of the performance and qualitative experience of those partnership students who progress through the university.

**Figure 1: Arrangements for the implementation of associate and licensed college arrangements**

| *Process* | *Responsibilities* |
|---|---|
| **Stage 1**<br>College ideas<br>College draft proposals | General discussions between college staff and university staff co-ordinated by a person nominated by the university rector and a person nominated by the college principal. The discussions will be carefully co-ordinated to ensure draft proposals are realistic and, in principle, achievable. |
| **Stage 2**<br>Discussions between college principal and rector and advisors as appropriate<br>College strategic plan<br>University strategic plan and hence to university ADP | **In college**<br>The college principal is responsible, via the college articles of government, and it is for each college to determine how it will deal with this stage.<br><br>**In the university**<br>The rector is responsible via the university articles of government. The rector already has a small advisory group on partnerships and this will continue to operate. In considering a particular course/programme proposal, this group receives advice from the dean who will be responsible for the delivery of the proposed course/ programme. |
| **Stage 3**<br>University validation process<br>Admissions and enrolments<br>Curriculum delivery and assessment of students<br>Outcomes and review | The development and review of policies and procedures relating to stage 3 are the remit of the academic partnership committee, a sub-committee of the academic board. The committee is chaired by the dean of inter-faculty studies and membership includes deans, college vice principals, the university secretary, staff from inter-faculty studies and co-options. |

Partly in acknowledgement of the size and diversity of its partnership network, the University of Central Lancashire is currently in the process of developing a new AIM system which will be phased-in over the next two years.

## *The integration of progression into the total curricular structure*

The so-called seamless robe of post-compulsory provision is best woven by the creation of holistic curricular frameworks – usually based upon CAT (credit accumulation and transfer) and modular schemes – which offer well-defined exit point awards starting at access level and ending at taught masters programmes, and which form the basis of automatic academic advancement. Progression, therefore, becomes an inherent entitlement rather than a process of application or negotiation involving qualitative judgement or backward steps. Fortunately, such entitlement is already integrated into most degree programmes, via the Cert. and Dip. HE awards; but curricular integration remains more problematic for HND/C (and in the future possibly for G/NVQ) programmes which still suffer from the reluctance of professional bodies to fully embrace CATS and where pedagogic approaches and competency-based learning outcomes are at variance with those of undergraduate degrees.

## *An effective administrative and academic infrastructure and interface*

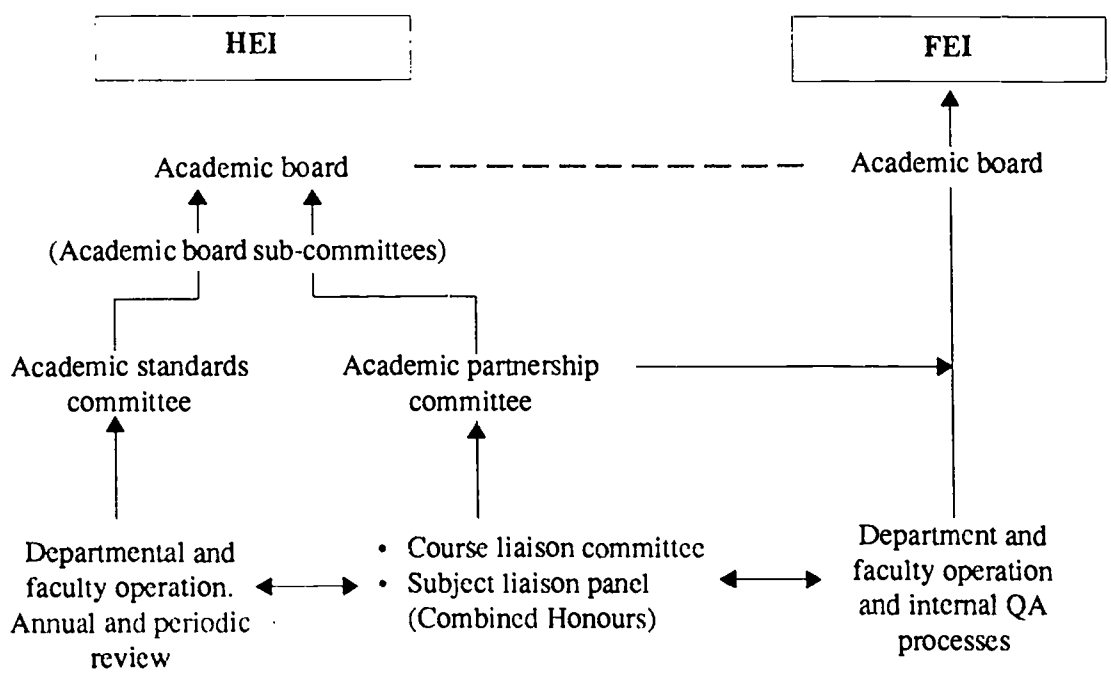
To avoid the marginalisation of partnership activity requires access to institutional sources of power, policy and the resource, and this, in turn, needs the creation of clear lines of reporting both within each partner institution and at the partnership interface. Clearly, different structural models will apply to different forms of partnership, although the model which has evolved over 10 years within LINCS (see **Figure 2**) may have some generalisable value. The academic interface is the product of a series of course liaison panels and (for combined honours) subject liaison panels for each partnership course. In principle, these panels ensure the equality assurance described by John Bird earlier, and are responsible for off-campus operational delivery, assessment, and course-based quality assurance. Through departmental and faculty review they ultimately report to the academic standards committee (a sub-committee of the university academic board) and to the college academic board. Another university sub-committee, the academic partnership committee, addresses the partnership interface at the level of strategic management. Although chaired by the university, and containing all academic deans, the membership of this committee is dominated by senior college staff, including HE co-ordinators and vice-principals (academic).

Such structures often form the arena for lively and sometimes heated debate, but in the spirit of partnership the opportunity to exchange views and air differences should be seen as essential to the longer-term health of inter-institutional relationships.

## *A regime which acknowledges, supports, and rewards effective liaison*

If not the propellant fuel of FHE partnership, effective liaison at all levels is the essential lubricant. In a more perfect world, the time given over to such liaison – encompassing the whole academic cycle, from pre-course counselling through to progression exercises, staff development, and annual review – would be fully supported and the opportunity costs to individual staff acknowledged. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In the current climate, staff are often rewarded for their research and publication profile, but rarely for a level of liaison which leads to high quality ratings.

Figure 2: LINCS administrative infrastructure



### *Continuous induction process for students*

Progression should be perceived as beginning on day one of the academic career of all partnership students. From the outset they need much higher levels of information than on-campus students to explain their status, rights and responsibilities, to map their progression routes and honestly addresses progression problems and limitations. This information, usually in the form of a dedicated student handbook, should be complemented by HE staff attendance at college enrolment and induction events and reinforced mid-year by participation in progression events at which students select their study programme for the next academic session. Within the best partnership schemes, academic staff regularly visit colleges and contribute to the classroom experience. Students are also regarded as full and equal members of the host university and are positively encouraged to use all its facilities, including the library, computer centre, students' union and student services.

At the point of actual progression into the HEI, partnership students need dedicated induction events which explain the realities of studying at a new institution; very different in size, culture and complexity to their previous study centre.

### *Appropriate criteria to judge the quality of FHE provision*

There are still a small number of partnership schemes which do not guarantee academic progression because of HE concerns over the quality of the provision delivered in FE. Students are therefore required to overcome additional hurdles, both administrative and academic, which are not imposed on their on-campus counterparts.

Whilst academic quality and academic parity are essential components of all FHE partnerships, this situation is clearly unfair and unjust. Its resolution requires an acceptance that HE in FE is not the same as HE in HE, and that different quality criteria may need to be applied. Of these, fitness for purpose is the most important, since for some students, especially part-time adult returners, the FE environment can provide a better total learning experience. Classes tend to be smaller, staff more experienced, peer group support is higher and pastoral care more dedicated. Given this, the real challenge is for HE to maintain the same total quality when students progress. Longitudinal cohort analyses, so far rarely prioritised by HEIs, need to be undertaken to monitor how this challenge is being faced, and the results fed back into the overall quality process.

Applying fitness for purpose to other kinds of students, such as full-time school leavers, may result in different quality judgements. Such students may want an institutional infrastructure, including a students' union, residential accommodation and extra-curricular facilities, which are not part of the current FE culture. At worst, they can feel marginalised within an academic overspill estate. At best, though, they may benefit from smaller classes, higher levels of specialist equipment, and teachers who regard them as premier students.

Other criteria to judge the quality of FHE partnership will differ according to the academic product delivered, the mode of delivery and the nature of the partnership. In all cases, however, the quality of the partnership as a whole should be judged, as well as its component parts. HEIs should also acknowledge the growing maturity of their partners (i.e. accept a dynamic partnership) and move from the imposition of quality checklists to an acceptance of the college's own quality assurance system. In this way, difference will be seen as a strength not a weakness.

## Short haul and long haul progression issues

On face value, so long as academic progression is guaranteed by strategic planning, geographical progression for students studying at a campus close to the host HEI does not pose a significant problem. Even so, there are challenges to be met. For example, even short distances, for those without a car or convenient public transport in the evenings, can be difficult. For many minority ethnic women even the shortest distance can be perceived as a cultural marathon. Also, many students simply want to stay at their familiar local college, and find the prospect of moving to a much larger and more impersonal study centre daunting. Moreover, sustaining the initial study mode, especially part-time evening (the dominant mode within LINCS),

into higher levels at the university can pose problems of class viability.

Short haul challenges can be addressed in several ways. Higher level provision may be provided at the colleges, but this has obvious resource implications and may result in an upward academic drift which is not in the best long-term funding interests of FE colleges. Some, however, may wish to develop narrow, specific pathways in areas of strength. For students who do progress to the HEI it is important, as suggested earlier, to provide survival training via a dedicated induction process, good 'after sales' care and performance monitoring. It is worthy of note that many former LINCS students, particularly women, devise their own survival strategies which include peer group support and a 'buddy system' in which they opt for the same courses, study at the same pace and graduate together. The problem of class viability within the evening-only route can be solved by the introduction of a 12 hour curricular day in which some classes for all students are scheduled only in the evening and not duplicated on the day time timetable. In this way pressure is taken off classrooms, full-timers can rationalise their timetables and even very small numbers of students progressing from the colleges can be accommodated. However, efforts to introduce this solution within the University of Central Lancashire have so far proved unsuccessful.

This contribution deliberately avoids the most problematic area of long haul progression, created by the development of overseas partnerships, and currently beset by quality concerns and fashionable 'sleaze' allegations. Clearly, students progressing from (say) Malaysia will require an extremely high level of dedicated induction, cultural orientation, and on-going support.

Long haul progression is also a growing issue within the United Kingdom where partnerships have been forged between geographically distant institutions. Whilst the rationale for some of these relationships is questionable, most are based on the desire to address educational deprivation in isolated regions. Either way, the problem of progression still needs to be solved.

Traditional, 'low tech' solutions include the negotiation of guaranteed credit transfer agreements with the Open University, and this has already been achieved for students within the LINCS network. However, many students initiated into higher education via regular class contact and peer group support find distance learning unpalatable, and consequently do not progress at all. A more satisfactory solution, therefore, in the longer-term, must be to assist isolated colleges in the delivery of complete award bearing programmes of study, since this obviates the need for any travel to the host HEI. This may be achieved in a low tech manner by maximising college expertise through staff development (including postgraduate study) and through the prioritisation of strategic resources. A more exciting 'high tech' alternative, however, is the creation of the virtual college, which exploits inter-active video and other components of the burgeoning information superhighway to export higher level provision live within the local college. The virtual college already exists in parts of Australia and the United States, and a small number of UK universities, such as Plymouth and Sunderland, are making similar technological in-roads

In partnership with Furness College (Barrow) the University of Central Lancashire is currently engaged in a two year pilot project, entitled 'The enhancement of remote-site teaching and learning', to explore further the value and potential of these new technologies to partnership enterprise. Funded by a British Telecom university development award of £100,000 over two years (1994–96), and based upon BT's Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) the project will focus on both the administrative aspects of long haul progression (e.g. telematic enrolment and progression events) and academic delivery, with the BA Teaching and Training, the Cert. Ed. and Year 0 Engineering programmes providing the first trials.

It should be stressed, however, that multi-media technology is no quick or easy panacea to the problem. It requires significant investment in equipment and in staff training and development. More significantly, returning once again to fitness for purpose, it will be important to ensure that the new technology remains only a complement to personal classroom experience, and does not take its place. Since when has virtual reality been as good as the real thing?

## Conclusion: towards a future agenda for partnership

Whilst the new technologies will clearly influence the future of FHE partnerships there are many other issues which must contribute to the future agenda. Of these, the following are of most immediate relevance:

### *The development of a national credit framework*

The notion of post-compulsory 'curricular merger' based upon a standard academic ecu (educational credit unit) has been advocated in several reports and is worthy of very serious consideration. It has the potential to create a smooth moving pavement untroubled by the expensive calibration procedures of many of the current CAT schemes. In the post-corporate world, however, such a framework can only emerge by consensus, not external imposition.

### *The development of an associate degree*

Given the inability (or disinclination?) to invest sub-degree awards like the Dip. HE with either academic or vocational credibility, it is appropriate for a future agenda to include new awards, like the associate degree, which challenge the complacency of a 30 per cent participation rate and which seek to harness the potential of the 70 per cent still excluded from the HE experience. This new award, based upon a 2+2 or 2+1 model, could be delivered entirely within the FE/community college sector, and whilst forming the foundation for guaranteed progression into the traditional honours degree, it would be complete and coherent in itself. It could provide a broad-based, non-specialist curriculum, inculcating the skills of independent learning and articulating with the new competency model inherent within G/NVQ.

An insistence on precise learning outcomes for the associate degree, however, would require solid support from employers and professional bodies, and both a higher level of pedagogic precision and intellectual self-restraint from academics delivering higher education across the board.

### *Associate college status and the exclusivity debate*

In the buyer's market generated by HE expansion over recent years FE colleges have been tempted (or even lured) to enter agreements with several HEIs and to play one franchiser off against the other. Whatever developmental advantages this multiple dealing may have given FEIs, they have also been off-set by multiple QA systems, multiple funding regimes, multiple administrative structures, and some progression instability for students. It is likely, therefore, in the ensuing era of HE consolidation, that firmer, closer, more cost effective relationships will emerge based upon exclusive dealing and more long-term strategic planning. Recently, for example, the University of Central Lancashire initiated a two-tiered form of association with its college partners: licensed college status, which is non-exclusive, but which limits HE delivery to access and level one of HE programmes; and associate college status which trades exclusivity for (potentially) the delivery of all academic levels. This move was not without its tears, but so far seven colleges have decided that associate status is in their best institutional interest.

### *Widening participation to under-represented groups*

Whilst an overt rationale for FHE partnerships has often been the desire to widen participation, the more honest and more potent reason, at a time of expansion in HE, was to merely increase participation. In this, franchising has been very successful, and such success does not necessitate an apology. Zero growth in full-time HE numbers, however, provides partnerships with the opportunity to concentrate on widening access, particularly in the part-time study mode. Of course, partnership per se does not necessarily widen participation. Recent research on LINCS cohorts has revealed successes in this respect (a growing number of women returners) but also notable failures (in attracting minority ethnic students into degree provision). But by offering a familiar academic halfway house, closer to home and with more bespoke support, partnership provision does have greater potential to reach groups that universities cannot reach.

## *The need for sustained research*

It is pleasing to note the emergence, of late, of a new partnership literature, largely comprising of surveys of the nature and extent of FHE initiatives. What is now needed, however, is more focused empirical research on specific schemes and funded by national bodies. Such research may isolate both good and bad practice by exploring funding arrangements, international partnerships, or the quality of the FHE interface, but particular emphasis needs to be given to initial cohort analysis and to longitudinal analysis of those partnership students who progress into the HEI.

## *FHE franchising as a beginning and not an end in itself*

The development and expansion of this form of partnership has demonstrated the potential to erode artificial binary lines and to move towards a coherent learning continuum within the United Kingdom. This achievement can now be enhanced by more mature and equal forms of partnership, including collaborative course development and delivery and the straightforward validation of new HE programmes within FE, and extended to include all other providers of learning and training, including schools, and both the public and the private sectors. In this way, the universities can emancipate themselves from the constraints of physical plant and, as academic brokers, accredit learning wherever it takes place.

Should any of this future agenda be implemented, then the central analogy of this contribution, that of passing the baton, becomes less meaningful or even irrelevant since there would be different runners on a different track running a different race. Indeed, the function of the baton itself would become less athletic and more orchestral.

# Managing and getting the commitment

*Paul Gallagher and Pater Chambers, illustrations by Julie Fletcher*
*Bradford and Ilkley Community College*

## Introduction

### *Identifying quality*

Quality requires commitment but unless the nature of quality is clearly defined, getting commitment is a very difficult and amorphous process. All members of any organisation have got to know what particular combination of standards, expectations and products relate to that organisation. Just as 'you can no more teach what you don't know than you can go back to where you ain't been', you can no more get commitment to a quality you can't identify with than you can reach the standards and achievements that are the hallmarks of that quality.

### *Putting quality into an institutional context*

We cannot identify what we mean by quality without describing the organisation whose quality standards we manage and to which we seek to gain the commitment of our staff.

Bradford and Ilkley Community College is a unique contributor to higher education in the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) sector. Large mixed economy colleges have distinctive characteristics, which include strong partnerships with higher education institutions, usually based on a substantial record of providing HE programmes. Our college has these characteristics but, in addition, the scale of its full-time undergraduate programmes, just short of 3,000 students, its extensive part-time programmes for about 1000 students, and its long partnership with CNAA (Council for National Academic Awards) justify the claim to be unique. Added to the 5,500 FTEs in adult and further education, we have a complement some 40,000 enrolments. Thus what we describe is based on a different experience from that with which many other FE colleges will be familiar. We make much of the progression of our own adult and further education students on to our own higher education courses and to those of neighbouring HEIs; we make a substantial provision of access courses; and we recruit nationally to our higher education programme. Our only franchise is for FE teacher training with Huddersfield University. We franchise some higher education provision to nearby FE colleges. Our partnership with the University of Bradford, following the demise of CNAA, is a strong one, with a joint policy and planning group made up of equal representatives of the senior staff of the college and university and jointly chaired by the vice chancellor and the college principal. A collegiate board of studies supervises the college programmes that lead to university awards and it reports to the senate and the college academic board. The college has full representation on the university's course and teaching standards committee. The university has approved the college's validation and review procedures for its free standing courses and we run some joint university/college courses. It is a partnership based on trust and mutual benefit.

Our 'mixed economy' position is not an unmixed blessing. We have to comply with the requirements of both funding councils and that certainly extends the administrative load as well as creating certain strains on communication. We have to respond to HEFCE's quality assessment criteria as well as FEFC's inspection criteria. So far we have justified our self assessments of 'excellent' in applied social work and 'satisfactory' in business studies to the satisfaction of HEFCE and we wait with interest the visit of Terry Melia's FE inspectors in November 1995.

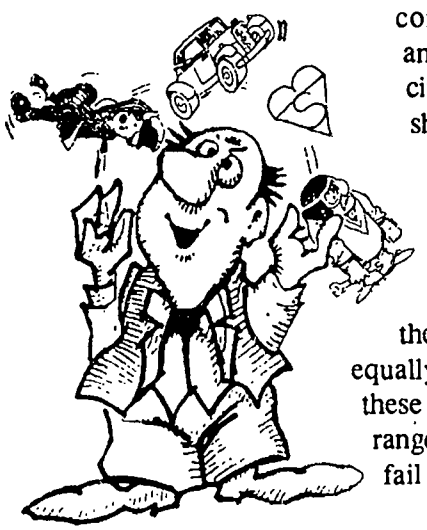
### *Strategies and operations*

Thus our getting commitment to quality reflects that background. It is no accident that this

contribution is a joint act. It is possible to infer that only lack of trust prevents an individual presentation. From the principal's strategic position, it is dangerous to let the operational manager speak too freely about what actually takes place less the strategies appear to fail; whilst for the director of academic programmes to allow the chief strategist to describe operations in public is to risk the creation of new and difficult 'strategic operations'. Such an inference has credibility, but it is not going to be acknowledged here. What has to be acknowledged is that the two dimensions, strategic and operational, are inextricably connected in the process of managing the commitment.

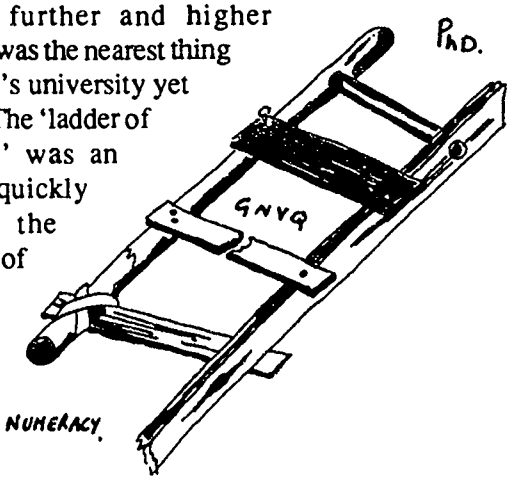
## *Parallel pursuits*

The establishment of the college in 1982 was a merger which brought a whole set of quality concepts from its constituent colleges. By 1984, consequent upon a successful CNAA institutional review, we had committed ourselves publicly to making everyone quality conscious. The strategic considerations were about what kind of quality was required. The operational considerations were about what we needed to do to bring it about. Reading the books was easy. Peters and Waterman's **In search of excellence** (1982) offered a useful model, but its examples were all too American. Goldsmith and Clutterbuck's **The winning streak** (1985) was better. British examples, albeit industrial, suggested that the quality characteristics of successful organisations could be described and conceptualised in ways that paralleled the educational enterprise. Businesses had to satisfy their customers by making quality products that were sufficiently successful to attract continued investment and finance from the city. If their services fell short on any of these three factors: consumer satisfaction, quality products and resource investment, they didn't survive. It's equally instructive to apply these features to the wide range of organisations that fail as well as those that succeed. The FE college has a similar task. It has to satisfy its customers, the students and their sponsors, by providing quality products, the courses and services it offers, in order to attract funding from its city, the funding councils. The college principal, like the company managing director, has to juggle these different considerations as the college defines what it wishes to achieve and how it sets about achieving it.



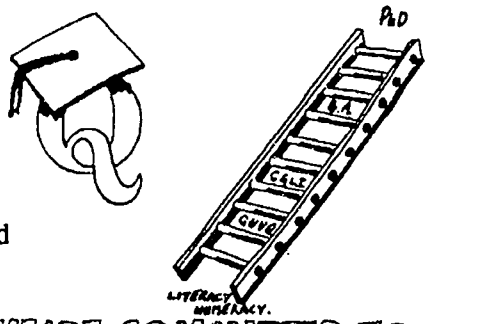
## *A successful product*

The college's mixed economy reflects its origins. Bradford 'Tech', the school of art, colleges of education and adult education centres had come together to create a comprehensive college of further and higher education. It was the nearest thing to the people's university yet established. The 'ladder of opportunity' was an image that quickly captured the imagination of the college members. Initially it was a very badly constructed ladder.




The rungs varied according to the competing priorities of different awarding bodies, the supports that offered progression were at different levels and the routes up the ladder were not guaranteed. Our quality consciousness required us to address each and every aspect of our 'ladder'.

What we set out to achieve was a properly constructed ladder. First it needed good institutional support. It required us to define more clearly what the college's objectives were, what each member's role was in achieving those objectives and how we could empower each member to deliver them. In that way, the ladder's rungs were well defined

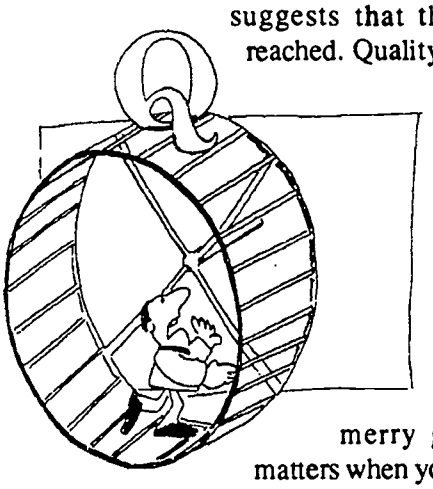


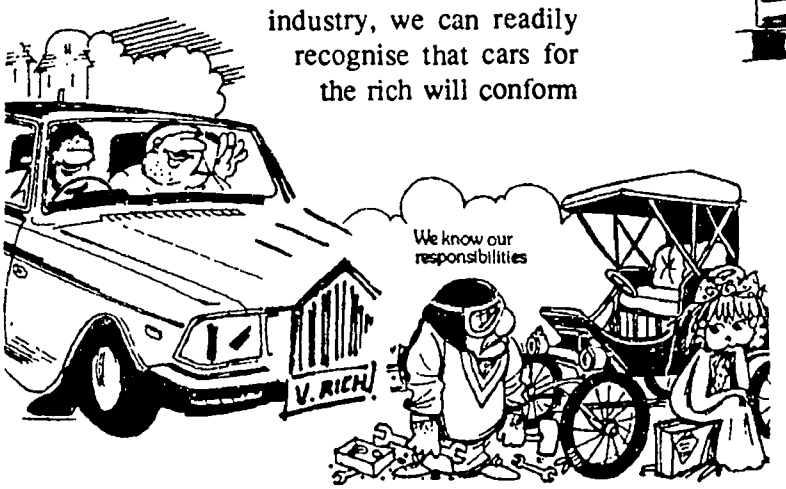

WE'RE COMMITTED TO ...

and reinforced and a consistent quality of build was established. By insisting on the same attention being paid to quality and detail on each rung, irrespective of its position on the ladder, our ladder of opportunity became both the definition of quality and the way we measured its achievement. We brought the same quality assurance procedures to bear on each rung of the ladder, determining that there should be no difference at each interface, whether it be FE/HE, GCSE/FE, ND/HD or AE/FE. Different traditions existed and different cultures were dominant. What we are still working on is blending those cultures into a new culture which ensures that our ladder of opportunity is a quality model.

## *Changing the model*

Where the ladder leads is all important and here strategists and operational managers are allowed to part company. The constant pursuit of quality suggests that the top is never reached. Quality is not static, but dynamic. Quality would seem to be a treadmill rather than a ladder. Depending where you are in the cycle it might be described as a merry go round. What matters when you have to manage commitment is that that culture commits all members agreeing to what the product is and how it will be achieved. At this stage, the metaphor needs to change. The ladder becomes the process whereby the product is delivered. If we think about the motor industry, we can readily recognise that cars for the rich will conform to different specifications to those for the mass market. The same inter-relating features of customers, product and investors determine what product will succeed. The education service appeals to a similar range of markets and so it too has to identify its product. So our college had to decide where the ladder should take us. Bradford and Ilkley college needed a model that was appropriate to its comprehensive nature, one that reflected the culture of quality to which it was committed.






## *A culture of quality*

For in the end, it is the culture of the organisation that determines and maintains the quality of its product. We intend therefore to outline the history and the story of how we mobilised the commitment of our existing staff members (all of them: teaching and non-teaching alike) to the particular quality product we draw from the college mission to which we are committed.

The story has three parts:

- The process of defining the nature of quality. What?
- The process of managing quality. How?
- The process of analysing its origins and getting and sustaining that commitment. Where does it come from?

## The nature of quality

### *Definitions*

The college quickly established a goal of quality consciousness, but members were unclear of its precise nature and how it could be developed. The commitment to progression, to building a ladder of opportunity shaped it, but definitions were so diverse that we needed to arrive at usable definitions. This represented the strategic dimension. The two main elements were:

- fitness for purpose; and
- performance to an agreed specification.

Questions about what purpose and whose specifications led to us adding the achievement of excellence.

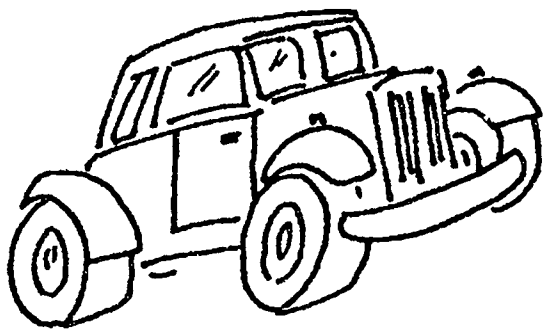
### *At the FE/HE interface*

Given the nature of the college, we were able to derive 'fitness of purpose' from the college's substantial role in the further education sector. We determined the performance specifications through negotiation between the demands of the FE sector and those of the HE sector and in terms of meeting the aspirations of our HE students, we set standards of achievement that were comparable with the levels of knowledge, skill and understanding prevalent in the HE sector.

## Managing the commitment

At one level getting commitment to our model was easy. Using the motor manufacturing model, we needed to decide the type. Providing we could get all those involved in its production to agree on the actual model – not a hybrid and, even more importantly not someone else's model, not an Oxbridge version (Morris Oxford or Austin Cambridge?), nor a technical college work horse (Leyland van or Tamworth Robin?), nor even the seduction of a new Renault – then the culture of FE would do it for us. The sector is enterprising enough. For all the public criticism, FE colleges have demonstrated the relevance of their programmes to the needs of local industry and the community and they have grown in business by responding to the multiple markets they have to satisfy and have done so with integrity. We've been cleared of fraud in the NVQ market, even though our customers lack awareness. In fact, we have topped up what we've been paid in order to provide the quality training.

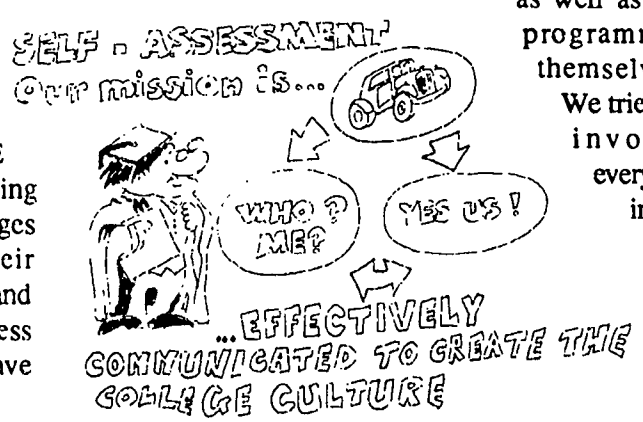
It is getting the agreement about the nature of the model and managing it that is difficult. The present climate no longer allows us the luxury of doing separate deals. Accountability is much more evident. Transparency has become a virtue. Forecasting and strategic planning may be the starting point for funding, but outcomes determine whether you get the actual £5 notes. The FE culture has had to transcend its Arthur Daley image and rise to the more sophisticated market practices of the city. Separate deals have to be subordinated to corporate identity, to getting agreement about our actual production model: the BICC saloon.



## Quality assurance processes

### *Self assessment*

The management of quality requires therefore a major exercise in agreeing what the model is. Arriving at the college mission is just that process. We spent months in the process because it was concerned with assessing ourselves and the meanings and values we placed on our programmes as well as the programmes themselves. We tried to involve everyone in the



process. External imperatives probably started the process. It is important to have a culture that accommodates external influences. We had the wisdom to choose the CNAA as our validating body for HE. CNAA's concept of partnership required us to develop our own systems to meet their specifications of quality. Institutional review and the exercise of seeking accreditation taught us the important principles of peer group review and validation to negotiate, not comply. Internal consistency was more important than competent articulation of principles and programmes. Indeed, people often rescued poor paper proposals. Running the car showed its worth; not the guff in the brochure.

### *Systems*

By applying CNAA type quality assurance principles across the college, we established systems that required all our course teams to articulate the ways in which their programmes fitted in with the college mission, whether at the approval stage or in the course of annual review; to accept that all lecturers involved had to be ready to defend what they did as part of a team responsible for the whole programme; and to demonstrate how they incorporated the judgments of external agents, as well as of their students and clients, into their decision-making.

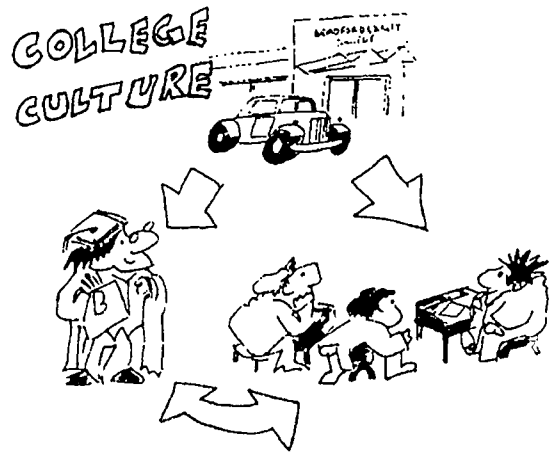
It is interesting to reflect on the process. Since HE staff had no choice, they quickly adopted and valued the internal processes that were used to develop internal consistency between course documentation and actual practice and to act responsively in a context of external evaluation. FE staff, under different external pressures, were slower to engage, but soon realised how the college culture rewarded effective participation. It should, however, be noted that the latter took teaching quality for granted. Management affirmed the system, monitored its implementation and saw to it that resource reflected success.

### *Quality of teaching/learning*

The CNAA model did not go far enough. The close link with systems produced good systems for quality assurance. A sense of ownership accompanied close involvement in the processes of course design, descriptions of course programmes and the presentation of evidence to demonstrate 'good health'. Such surrogate evidence of the actual quality of teaching and learning was fine if the student experience was a good one, or the salesman was persuasive, but it offered us no advice on how to change the model or improve the experience. Getting commitment requires the quality assurance procedures to focus on the actual experience in the classroom and workshop. Quality has to be demonstrated on the test drive as well as in the brochure's performance figures. Now we go into classrooms just as HEFCE assessors and FEFC inspectors have done. It is too soon to claim that this more precise focus on teaching/learning is fully implemented, but proposals for a 'buddy system' and greater readiness to allow observers into classrooms suggests that many staff appreciate commitment to quality at this level than they do more bureaucratic systems. When you are confident in your product, a test drive is an opportunity, not a challenge.


## Culture

All of this has to become part of the culture of the college and of the habit patterns of college members if commitment is to be sustained, once it has been initiated.



## *Communication*

The CNAA experience had confirmed the value of documentation in getting knowledge of the model to all members, although a shot of Heineken would help to reach some parts of the college. It provides a framework for dialogue, a frame of reference for staff and a measure for review and evaluation of the performance of our product. It demonstrates why you need 'an owner's handbook'. Eventually, ours took the form of a quality assurance manual. Its value lies in describing the product in terms of the two definitions with which we started:

- fitness for purpose; and
- performance to agreed specification.

It included policies, procedures and communications. It told us how to run the car, what we could expect of it and what we had to do if it went wrong. Equally importantly, it described the processes by which the third criterion would be recognised. Excellence is not a static quality. We and the market are always looking for more. Value is a threshold; value added is a ladder. The owner's manual has to be supplemented. That's where the garage staff come in. Although the quality assurance manual assists communication and describes the systems, it is the way that college members implement the systems that ensures the achievement of excellence as a dynamic, progressive process.

## *Familiarity*

Management (and reception) have little difficulty in familiarising themselves with the processes and the requirements to conform to standards. That's their job. Other staff, however, have other demands to satisfy. They have to deliver the product as well as satisfy agreed quality criteria. Their conditions of service sometimes prescribe their opportunities to do more than perform their specific sector role. They only have to produce part of the product. You don't have to be Karl Marx to understand the alienation of the production line if you apply that concept to the teaching/learning continuum. You don't have to be Charles Handy to see why management must assist all staff members to see what their function is in delivering the product and in ensuring its quality. That is why we spent so much time on agreeing the college mission, in discussing with our staff their understanding of it and the degree to which they felt equipped to deliver it. Detailed analysis required us to share understandings of our equality of opportunity policy, of our relationships to the Bradford community and of our eschewal of programmes that were not vocational or were beyond our capabilities. Humanities and horticulture were for others! Rolls Royces were for oil magnates. Effective management required us to incorporate these consideration into the induction programmes for new staff as well as into senior management training so that all staff could inculcate quality assurance into their habit systems. Staff training must ensure that staff know the owner's manual better than the owner. Culture and habit are two poles of the same process. Culture is the product of individual habits and their source and limitation, but unless the habits of members are consistent with organisational culture, commitment will not follow.

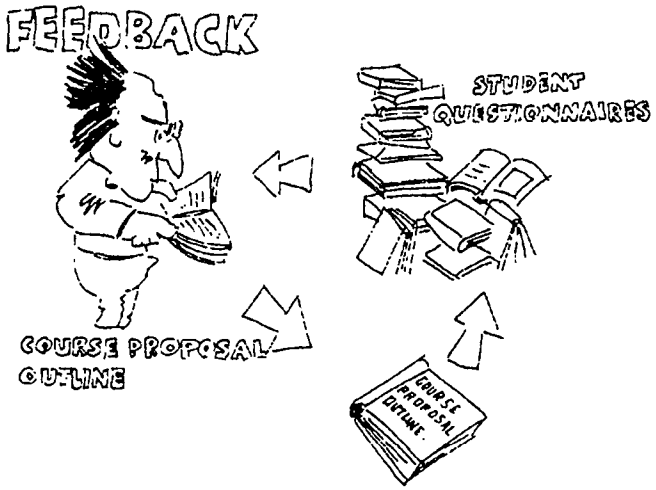
## *Habits*

So, our staff must operate within clear communication systems and become familiar with them. It means, as already outlined, agreement with a common identity and shared understanding of the product. It means that operations are conducted within clear and effective understandings of what the product is and how every individual matters because of their unique contribution to the total mission. That must become part of their habitual work, not like some staff of British Rail, who at best blame the train in front or else other colleagues, for example, the signallers, for late arrival. Getting commitment requires understanding of each individual's place in the production of our agreed model and his or her acceptance of collective responsibility.

## *Feedback*

The incorporation of effective quality assurance procedures into our institutional culture can only be ensured by continuous, comprehensive and effective feedback. Only by paying constant attention to quality issues, can future funding be secured, the competitive edge be enhanced and our numbers maintained. So quality assurance has to be embedded into our systems at every level.

Our production manager takes an interest. The director of academic programmes reads every examiner's and moderator's report and requires action on any challenge to quality standards from the appropriate head of department, who in turn ensures that the course leader pursues it with the course committee. Every school maintains its academic standards committee, but since quality begins with our customers it has to be operated by everybody. So it is documented and controlled by our institutional systems, roles and responsibilities are clearly-defined and we try to get everyone to 'own' their individual responsibility, by direct participation in review procedures that focus on our students' needs.




## Where does it come from?

Where quality commitment comes from needs an analysis of the present position.

### *Staff concerns*

The concern for quality starts with student needs, but introducing changes to meet such needs ignores the professional roles of staff at its peril. Unless we are disastrous employers, we appointed our staff because of their expertise and knowledge. If we are going to produce our model, it has to conform to their concerns or we risk mobilising resistances and reducing job satisfaction. This must sound conservative. The professions often seem preoccupied with protecting the present rather than founding the future. Nevertheless, the manifestation of their power in the individual staff member has to be the starting point of the negotiation of the model's quality.

### *Institutional values*

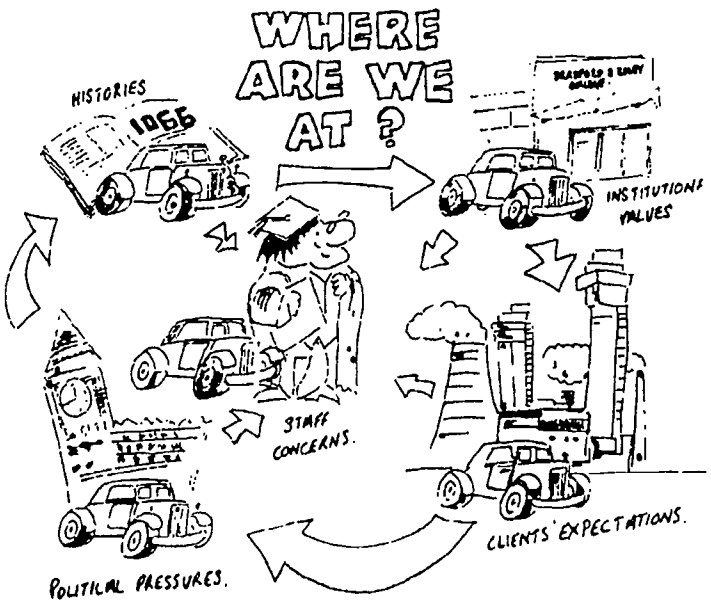
Each institution is unique and strong identity is the mark of a successful organisation. That's where the vision and the mission come in. They encapsulate the values that determine the product; they are often the synthesis of the professional concerns members bring to their work; they will shape the needs analysis that prepares our strategies for meeting students' needs and clients' expectations.

### *Clients' expectations*

Marketing our model requires interaction between what we are and where we are – the context and location within which we operate. Our context shapes our curriculum decisions. No quality without equality makes sense for an institution that serves a population of which a quarter is of minority ethnic origin.

### *Political pressures*

Public funding means political accountability and even political restraint. If the commitment to academic freedom sends us off only in the disinterested pursuit of sweetness and light we will get short shrift from our political masters; but we would also fail to meet the product specifications we have agreed. Equally, less formal influence on our model's design is exercised by key pressure groups and opinion leaders. Their activities will impinge on our management of quality and we must address them.



### *Histories*

All these factors combine to produce the history of both our product and our processes to produce and deliver it. They shape the culture of the college. Management needs to know that history and it has succeeded if staff share the same story as they work together in the production of the model.

## Where do we want to go?

It follows that getting commitment to the quality we have defined has to accommodate all that has been learnt from this analysis in order to manage the development of commitment to enhancing that quality through strategic planning.


### *Job satisfaction*

Product delivery must be a source of job satisfaction. The capacity to identify with the corporate image of the product and to know where your activities fit in its successful production is clearly important. It must build on previous sources, but not rely on them. It is sustained by dialogue and support. What's in it for me? can no longer be answered quite as positively as it was in the halcyon days when promotion was a realisable dream; but it can't be answered by creating more work, more pain and discontinuity. One of management's jobs is to ease those processes.

### *Strategic planning*

The development of programmes derives from the values of the institution. It is a truism that the process of strategic planning is about the operationalisation of mission. It is still a feature that has to be continually re-affirmed and the larger and more complex the organisation, the greater the value that coherence and clear direction has. It is also worth reminding ourselves that even if a new model is called for, we can't usually afford the luxury of a new production line.

### *Customer care*

Customer care has to be the central concern of quality management. Our picture of feedback illustrated this by putting student opinion as the key reference for understanding college culture and shaping course design. Constructing the college charter was instructive. We nearly got back to the hybrid production model and produced several different charters. The reasons were purely defensive. We tried to anticipate future litigation. When we went back to our mission, it fell into place. By asking what our customers needed and what we expected of them, we produced a single unified document that is useful to us in describing our product and the quality of the services we are trying to provide.

### *Restraints on power*

Ideology is an important element of values and therefore of quality, but realism is a necessary component of the management of an effective and efficient service. Again, it is important that all staff are realistic and aware and senior management is open and clear about the restraints within which the college has to operate.

### *Futures*

If history starts the process, the picture of where we want to go and what we want to achieve continues it. So as we look forward to a new production model, we have to decide what we need to do in each of these areas. We hope it is about creating novel approaches.

## *What do we need to do?*

The element of 'design' necessary for change still requires some exercise of judgment. Stability in education is perhaps the most future orientated value of the lot. Certainly Dearing's promise of five years' stability in the National Curriculum won the hearts of teachers because of its novelty. It leaves us with a view that getting commitment to quality is about getting commitment to managed change. We need novel answers to these five questions:

- For staff members: What's in it for me? How do we convince the people in the system that it's in their interests to change? How do we build on their professional commitment?
- For the strategic planners: Where does it fit? How we can ensure the new product is fit for purpose?
- For our customers: How do we market it? How do we make the contact that marries our product with their needs?
- For our paymasters: Who must we satisfy? How do we influence the power brokers, the pressure groups and the opinion leaders and satisfy them of the utility and quality of our product?
- For our planners: How do we change?

## Conclusion

If institutions are prepared to keep posing those questions as new ones each time, we will keep the treadmill of quality turning. Without them, we will need a comparative study, not of 'The role of wilderness in the American mind' but of the role of bewilderment in the English academic mind. We won't have an appropriate product for the future and if we don't have a product, we won't have commitment. That is why the new BICC saloon is a car with wings.

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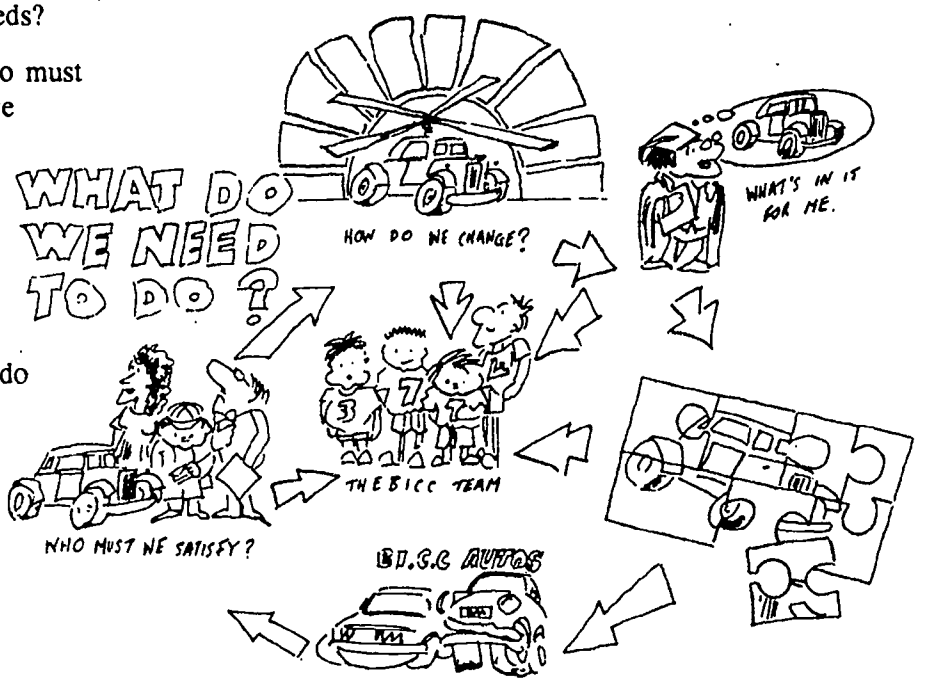

# Workshop summary

This section summarises the issues raised and discussions held in the three workshop sessions. Together with the summary of key issues from delegates' pre-conference questionnaires (see pages 4–6 above), these provide an agenda for future research and development.

## Workshop 1: Identifying the issues

- Clarification of the rationales for F/HE collaboration from all parties involved, including sector-wide funding and quality bodies, was thought to be essential to progress. This would need to relate to individual institutional missions and definitions of quality. The importance of openness, trust and recognition of different strengths and weaknesses between partner institutions was emphasised.

- Whilst it was felt important to value the diversity of collaborative provision, considerable uncertainty surrounded much of the terminology used; although staff in some FEIs were now more 'expert' in its interpretation, new institutions were embarking on such relationships without a nationally agreed set of definitions or clear and detailed advice on best practice.

- Concern was expressed that much collaborative provision was still not carried out in a spirit of equal partnership. In the face of resource difficulties some HEIs sacrificed partnerships rather than imposing constraints on internal departments with often devastating effects on students' ability to progress. Consequently there was a major erosion of trust between some FE/HE partners, reinforced by the perceived short-termism of HEIs linked to annual funding contracts.

- Such turbulence was not conducive to an atmosphere of effective quality assurance and concerns were expressed about how to establish systems which were owned effectively by both partners and recognised the strength of existing practices. Considerable ambiguity could arise over the involvement of external examiners and some difficulties had been caused by interventions of professional bodies with little experience of collaborative arrangements. Concerns were being felt increasingly by FEIs over the processes conducted by the HEQC not only in respect of the audit procedure but also how the discussions over standards would be conducted.

- Concern was also expressed about the variety of frameworks for quality assurance across funding, professional and examination bodies. This could lead to a position of FEIs being servants of too many, sometimes conflicting, masters. The difficulties were compounded when an FEI had engaged in partnership arrangements with more than one HEI. Student charters and pressure for national degree standards will also have an impact.

- Following incorporation FEIs faced a competing set of dilemmas in establishing their strategic priorities. Given the uncertainties over funding they had to balance diversification against mission drift, and proportions of full-time to part-time provision as well as choosing appropriate partners. All these had to be set against the imperative of ensuring the best experience for students. The impact of the development of a mass higher education system on the quality of the student experience forms the context for discussions of quality in F/HE partnerships.

- Particular problems were recognised with long-distance partnership arrangements, especially on the effect on student progression.

## Workshop 2: Managing quality assurance

- It was recognised that the great variety of quality assurance systems operating in both FE and HE made it difficult to identify the most appropriate mechanisms for evaluating collaborative provision. Some systems had a focus on student satisfaction, others on the operation of the partnership arrangements; furthermore it was difficult to know whether there should be an emphasis on evaluation at the module or course/programme level. Concerns were also expressed about the balance between annual monitoring and periodic review in order that both operational and strategic issues were addressed effectively.

- Concerns were voiced that the operation of collaborative provision would depend more on personalities than systems. It was recognised that arrangements were often instigated at the strategic rather than the operational level with the consequence that front-line staff were often involved in partnerships without attention being given to their other commitments. Furthermore, as quality assurance arrangements for partnerships became more part of mainstream QA activities some HEIs were imposing inappropriate demands on partner institutions or failing to acknowledge the QA arrangements already in place with existing partners when establishing new collaborations.

- Some disquiet was expressed that the 'new orthodoxy' which emphasised partnership failed to recognise some of the advantages that the franchise model offered. In particular FEIs new to collaborative programmes could avoid the dangers of reinventing the wheel by concentrating on customising off-the-shelf existing franchise programmes which had been market-tested previously by the HEI. Once institutions were accustomed to working together more truly collaborative programmes could be produced building on appropriate staff development and mutual trust. In such a model effective QA systems could also be built since FE and HE staff have a restricted number of issues upon which to work.

- Further and higher education should aim to respond their quality procedures to the expectations and agenda set by business and commerce. Some employers now require the whole of a degree course to be taken within a university before they will offer employment. It was reported that more than 50 per cent of graduates currently do not obtain employment in their degree subject area: employers should be encouraged to define their real needs. Often there are many small employers with differing requirements. Local employers often want a short-term 'training provision' and there can be tensions with national bodies. Lead bodies and professional bodies appear to be developing conflicts over NVQ levels 4 and 5. A question for the CBI might be 'How can your members convince those of us in education that you have quality assurance procedures in place that will ensure for us that your advice is reliable?'. If practices in industry, commerce or a profession change during the duration of a course, then fitness for practice (purpose) may be affected. Part-time courses may change appreciably during their duration and flexibility is important in validation procedures.

## Workshop 3: Recommendations for enhancing quality

- There needs to be a nationally agreed definition of terms used in collaborative provision which recognises the diversity of good practice in partnership, including the range of appropriate mechanisms for quality assurance.

- All collaborative arrangements to be underpinned by clear written agreements which cover initial institutional agreements, monitoring and review procedures (including QA), mutual rights and responsibilities, obligations to students, and arrangements for terminating the partnership.

- Collaborative arrangements should be established at two levels – institutional and course. HEIs should normally accept other HE institutions' QA agreements for institutional recognition and only impose requirements for course level where the course team in the FEI and the HEI had the key responsibility for QA.

- There needs to be mutual support between FE and HE to maintain partnerships and obligations to students even in times of resource constraints, national policy shifts and reductions in student numbers. Students on partnership schemes should be as important to the HEI as all other students.

- To support student progression through a collaborative system there needs to be:

  i) a focus on students and the student experience in collaboration and the quality assurance criteria;

  ii) clearly identified progression routes, backed up by high-quality guidance. This might include, in geographically dispersed systems, an openness about how progression may be difficult;

  iii) consideration of the implications of delivering whole HE programmes in FE and how this relates to what have been seen as the essential features of the student experience in HE;

  iv) jumping-off points for students with valued and useful credits within a ladder of progression and with agreed ways to jump back on again;

  v) explicit consideration of progression to employment with employer involvement in the collaboration if possible;

  vi) account taken of the diversity of students involved in collaborative ventures, especially as such ventures often have as part of their aims widening access to HE.

- The funding councils need to establish policies about the funding of HE in FEIs.

- Those responsible for the national policy agenda should ensure that there is effective and regular communication between themselves which is accompanied by unambiguous communications to both the FE and HE sector. Some stability in policy formulation would also be of great assistance in ensuring the quality of provision.

- The research agenda needs to recognise the danger of focusing on quality fears and bad practice. There should be research into good practice in collaboration, to identify and publicise examples of high quality provision, and to identify precisely what, for students, make a good quality F/HE experience.

# About the Mendip Papers

The Mendip Papers are a topical series of booklets written specially for managers in further and higher education. As managers and governors take on new responsibilities and different roles they face new challenges, whether in the areas of resource and financial management or in the pursuit of quality, the recruitment of students and the development of new personnel roles. The Mendip Papers provide advice on these issues and many more besides.

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