

The good, the bad and the ugly: learning the lessons from subject review in business and management

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Abstract

Subject review was the principal quality assurance mechanism for higher education in the UK between 1997 and 2001. It was conducted under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and involved the expenditure of a considerable amount of time and energy on the part of reviewers and reviewed alike. It is therefore pertinent to ask whether subject review generated anything that could assist business educators as they seek to enhance the quality of their academic practice. Although subject review has attracted a considerable amount of criticism, arguably certain aspects are of relevance to the ongoing debate as to what constitutes good and bad practice in teaching and learner support.

The paper discusses some of the findings of a BEST-funded project, the aim of which was to capture and disseminate 'the richness of academic practice identified' in the 164 subject review reports for business and management. What emerged from this investigation was a series of pedagogic principles that appeared to inform the judgments of reviewers. They included flexibility, strategic thinking, transparency, pedagogic pluralism; learner participation, consistency, collaboration between all who contribute to the student learning experience; stakeholder involvement; self-criticism; and procedures for embedding good practice.

Many of these principles are derived from theories of learning and teaching. In addition, a number reflect good business practice and should therefore be of particular concern to business educators. If applied wisely, the principles can facilitate reflection on teaching and can impact on learning. However, their existence suggests a mismatch between the espoused philosophy of subject review, 'fitness for purpose', and that of quality as 'excellence'.

Keywords: subject review; quality assurance; pedagogic principles

Introduction

Subject review was the principal quality assurance mechanism for higher education in the UK between 1997 and 2001. It superseded and, to some extent, built on the teaching quality assessment process, which had been introduced in the early 1990s. Subject review was conducted under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), established in 1997, and involved the expenditure of a considerable amount of time and energy on the part of reviewers and reviewed alike.

It is therefore pertinent to ask whether subject review generated anything that could assist educators as they seek to enhance the quality of their academic practice. Although subject review attracted a considerable amount of criticism, arguably certain aspects are of relevance to the ongoing debate as to what constitutes good and bad practice in teaching and learner support.

For business and management, subject review was a particularly salutary experience since providers tended to perform less well than those in many other subject areas. This observation, however, needs to be understood in the context of institutional location, inferior staff-student ratios and the diverse nature of both the disciplinary community and the student body. That said, what can be learnt from subject review may well have a particular significance for business educators. The paper

discusses some of the findings of a BEST-funded project, the aim of which was to capture and disseminate 'the richness of academic practice identified' in the 164 subject review reports for business and management. Particular attention is given to:

- ❖ the nature of subject review and its positive and negative features;
- ❖ the background to, and conduct of, the project;
- ❖ what was deemed to constitute good and bad practice in business and management education.

Underlying the paper is the belief that, notwithstanding its limitations, subject review has something to offer all who are concerned about quality in business and management education.

Subject review

The stated purposes of the QAA subject review were:

to ensure that the public funding provided is supporting education of an acceptable quality, to provide public information on that education through the publication of reports... and to provide information and insights to encourage improvements in education (QAA 2001)

In reviewing the quality of education two major principles were applied. These were *peer review* and *criterion-referenced assessment*.

With respect to *peer review*, each institution was subject to a three-day visit by a team drawn mainly from the disciplines concerned and specially constituted for the purpose. As well as institutions of higher education, many further education colleges running courses funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England were also reviewed by these teams.

The role of the team was to assess provision by applying a form of *criterion-referenced assessment*, with the criteria being set by the institution subject to review in a self-assessment document (SAD). The criteria were in the form of a statement of aims and objectives, which reflected the priorities of institutions with respect to their provision. This approach is described in each report in the following terms:

Subject review is carried out in relation to the subject aims and objectives set by each provider. It measures the extent to which each subject provider is successful in achieving its aims and objectives (QAA 2001)

In setting their aims and objectives, providers took account of external factors, such as professional body requirements and subject benchmarking. For business and management, however, it should be noted that, at the time of the 2000-01 subject review, the subject benchmark statement had only recently been published and few institutions made explicit reference to it in their SAD.

Within the framework of their aims and objectives, each institution reviewed was awarded a grade for six separate aspects of provision. These were:

- ❖ Curriculum design, content and organisation;
- ❖ Teaching, learning and assessment;
- ❖ Student progression and achievement;
- ❖ Student support and guidance;
- ❖ Learning resources;
- ❖ Quality management and enhancement.

In order to determine the grade, the following tests were applied:

To what extent do the student learning experience and student achievement, within this aspect of provision, contribute to meeting objectives set by the subject provider?

Do the objectives set, and the level of attainment of those objectives, allow the aims set by the subject provider to be met? (QAA 2001)

Details of the grades and what each signified are set out in Table 1.

Underlying this approach was a 'fitness for purpose' view of quality (Harvey & Green 1993). This meant judging quality in terms of the extent to which different aspects of provision met the intentions of providers as expressed in their aims and objectives rather than against any preconceived notions of what might be regarded as 'good', 'bad' or 'ugly'.

The outcome of each review was an institutional report. As well as indicating the grades awarded to the institution,

Grade	Descriptor
1	The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.
2	This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvements could be made. The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.
3	This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however there is scope for improvement. The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.
4	This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Table 1: Grades used by subject reviewers

the report included a commentary on each of the six aspects of provision. Amongst other things the comments were intended to indicate the reasons why a particular grade had been awarded.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, subject review was controversial. Indeed, it was a particularly invasive form of scrutiny and relatively few of those that came into contact with it emerged completely unscathed, at least in the short term.

From a positive point of view, there are at least three features to which its advocates would draw attention. First, it was relatively comprehensive in its coverage with respect to subject areas; levels of course, from sub-degree to PhD; aspects of provision; and institutions. Thus, it provided a broad overview of the quality of higher education in England and Northern Ireland, the two parts of the UK covered by subject review, at a particular moment in time.

Second, the use of the six-aspect framework ensured a reasonable amount of consistency in the way that providers were reviewed. Although there was some overlap between aspects, they did have a certain amount of coherence and would be familiar to anyone directly involved in higher education.

Last, there was an attempt to make the process as transparent as possible. This was achieved, in part, by the publication of a subject review handbook (QAA 2000), containing the review criteria and procedures for determining grades. In addition, institutional and subject overview reports are freely available on the web (QAA 2003). Indeed, it is these that have served as the principal empirical resource for the project reported here. Thus, it has contributed to the process of securing greater public accountability in higher education provision and increased knowledge of the scale and nature of

what is on offer.

More negatively, however, subject review has attracted a considerable amount of criticism. First, because they are in the public domain the reports are fairly bland. Although some evaluative vocabulary is used, with laudatory terms like 'excellent', 'commended' and 'good practice' appearing in a number of reports, generally vivid and/or extreme language is eschewed. Moreover, in making critical comments the language is generally guarded and, on the whole, overtly pejorative terms, such as 'poor', 'weak', and 'bad practice' are conspicuous by their absence.

Second, the grading system can be said to be misleading. For example, a maximum score of 24 (i.e. 6 times 4) was not intended to indicate perfection or excellence, simply that the institution had 'substantially met' its aims and that its provision was 'fit for the purpose' intended. As many of the reports illustrate, institutions with a top score could still have shortcomings. However, subject reviewers did not deem these to be sufficiently serious to warrant dropping a grade. It was assumed that an institution would be awarded grade 4 unless there were grounds for making deductions. This contrasts markedly with a system where points have to be earned.

Cook (2003) makes a related point. Having carried out an extensive quantitative analysis of subject review grades across all subject areas, he reached the conclusion that:

grade inflation has now produced a situation where the system is failing to distinguish between almost 80 per cent of all provision. This may indicate a level of excellence that would be very reassuring. More likely it indicates that the process has become so well known that most institutions can easily comply with the demands.

(Cook 2003, p.56)

In other words, the grading system is not sufficiently fine-tuned to serve as a basis for differentiating between providers.

Last, making comparisons on the basis of the grades and points made in reports is discouraged. The following note of caution appears in every report:

Readers should be cautious in making comparisons of subject providers solely on the basis of subject review outcomes. Comparisons between providers with substantively different aims and objectives would have little validity.

(QAA 2000-01)

This warning notwithstanding, many league tables of higher education institutions incorporate some element of the outcomes of subject review.

Critics of subject review have also highlighted the excessively bureaucratic nature of the process, the endless paper chases to which it gave rise, and the variability of grades awarded across subjects (see, for example, THES 2001).

The project

As mentioned earlier, the 'raw material' for the project on which this paper is based were the contents of the 164 institutional subject review reports for business and management. These were issued during 2000-01 and covered both higher education and further education institutions, insofar as the latter were involved in higher education provision. A breakdown of the reports by institution is shown in Table 2.

In analysing the content of the reports the initial brief was to:

- ❖ identify any lessons for business education;
- ❖ identify opportunities for BEST to serve the community in addressing these issues;
- ❖ collate cited occurrences of good practice;
- ❖ collate areas of weakness or poor performance.

To facilitate engagement with the text of the reports a software package, QSR N6, was used. Reports were downloaded from the QAA website and pruned of standardised material. The remaining text was initially interrogated using a variety of laudatory terms (e.g. 'positive',

	No.
pre 1992 universities	18
post 1992 universities	25
university colleges	5
other	8
Higher education institutions (HEIs)	56
Further education institutions (FEIs)¹	108
TOTAL	164

Table 2: reports by institution

Notes

1. Four FEIs were subject to a second review visit. In two of these cases the report on the second visit was published and both reports have been included in the totals. In the other two cases, the second report is not available and therefore only the first report has been included. Thus, provision in a total of 162 institutions was reviewed.
2. Relatively few pre-1992 universities were included since a considerable number had been reviewed during 1993-94 under the teaching quality assessment process and, for various reasons¹, it was not necessary for them to be reviewed again.
3. As well as mainstream business and management courses, a number of reviews and associated reports also covered cognate subject areas such as hospitality, leisure, recreation, sport, tourism and, in a very few cases, economics. Courses ranged from Higher National Certificate/Diplomas in Business Studies, through first degrees and professional qualifications (e.g. Chartered Institute of Marketing; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) to postgraduate courses (e.g. MSc in Information Management for Business; MSc in International Marketing Management).

'commend(ably/able)', 'exemplary', 'impress(ed/ive)', 'sound') and pejorative terms (e.g. 'weak', 'inadequate' and 'inconsistent') that had been used by the reviewers to identify what they regarded as good practice and to indicate where they felt there was room for improvement. The selection of these terms was informed by a close reading of the subject overview report and a sample of institutional reports.

The findings informed decisions about the priority areas for the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) Phase 5 applications and guidance for institutions interested in preparing FDTL 5 bids. They also provided leads for possible BEST Stories (case studies of successful innovation commissioned by the subject centre). Overall, the findings can be said to yield some limited and qualified insights into the state of business and management education at the beginning of the 21st Century. Some of these come from analyses of the judgements of the reviewers and others from close examination of the aims and objectives of providers (Macfarlane & Ottewill 2003).

A model of good practice?

One of the most interesting, and potentially far-reaching, findings to emerge from the project was a series of pedagogic principles that appeared to inform the judgments of reviewers. To some extent this finding sits uneasily with a 'fitness for purpose' view of quality since it seems to imply that, regardless of the formal position, reviewers were, at least subliminally, operating on the basis of a notion of 'excellence' in provision (Harvey & Green 1993). In pointing this out, it is not suggested that there was a hidden agenda, simply that, as often happens, there was a mismatch between an espoused stance and what actually happened in practice.

Although a whiff of pragmatism pervades some of the pedagogic principles, others are derived from contemporary theories of learning and teaching. Arguably, if applied wisely, they can be used to facilitate reflection on teaching and to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. Some principles, however, are contentious and would not necessarily command general agreement. That said, here it is intended to use them to sketch what might be regarded as, at least in the eyes of the reviewers, an ideal type of provision for business and management programmes. In so doing, it is worth emphasising that, from a subject perspective, some of the principles reflect what some would regard as good business practice. Whether this also makes them sound educational principles is a moot point. Nonetheless, it can be argued that they should receive particular attention from business educators, as opposed to colleagues from other subject areas. Of course, this does not mean that they should be accepted unthinkingly. Rather, the onus is on those who feel that they are inappropriate for educational practice to explain and justify why they are unsuitable.

The principles are listed in Table 3, together with some

illustrative examples from one or more subject review reports. The examples should be seen as indicative. They could be replicated many times to demonstrate that the principles were applied extensively and with some consistency, although it is not possible to measure this precisely. All the examples in the table are taken from institutional reports. For each principle, the Subject Overview Report (2001) provides confirmation of their veracity.

One of the most pervasive principles is *strategic thinking*. Thus, an ideal provider is one that, at the strategic level, has processes in place to enable the planning of learning, teaching and assessment practices; facilities for student support and guidance; and the acquisition and deployment of learning resources. There would need to be evidence of the application of the classic corporate planning cycle to educational practice, complete with environmental analyses, mission statements, objectives, action plans and so on. To some extent, strategic thinking in a pedagogic context resonates with Biggs' model of 'constructive alignment' (1999). In the model, he gives pride of place to curriculum objectives. 'Get them right, and the decisions as to how they are to be taught, and how they may be assessed, follow' (Biggs 1999, p.28). To Biggs' list could be added decisions as to how much and what kind of additional student support is needed to enable objectives to be met; the resources students require to facilitate their learning; and how, when and where they might be accessed.

From the perspective of subject review, the strategies pursued by a model provider would need to give expression to the principles of:

- ❖ *flexibility*, enabling students to have as much choice as possible over when, how and what they study;
- ❖ *transparency*, ensuring that students are aware of what is expected of them in terms of learning outcomes, assessed tasks and what they must do to improve their performance/maximise their potential;
- ❖ *pedagogic pluralism*, adopting a variety of teaching methods and assessment practices to reflect the multi-faceted nature of learning outcomes and diversity of learning styles;
- ❖ *learner participation*, through the adoption of teaching practices which stimulate student involvement in the learning process;
- ❖ *consistency* in operating processes that impact directly on students (e.g. marking) and contribute to quality enhancement; and
- ❖ *liaison and collaboration* between all who contribute to the student learning experience, not just tutors (e.g. student learning advisers, information specialists, careers advisers, learning technologists).

A model provider of business and management courses would also be one that took steps to maximise the *involvement of all stakeholders*, particularly students, staff, employers and professional bodies, in every aspect of the educational process. Thus, there would be an expectation that both internal and external stakehold-

Principle	Illustrative Example(s)
strategic thinking	Accrington and Rossendale College was praised for having ‘a clear teaching and learning strategy delivering good-quality teaching and learning experiences’ and Canterbury Christ Church University College for a ‘strong (commitment) to a clear institutional strategy for student support and guidance’. By contrast, Bedford College was criticised for ‘the lack of a guiding learning resources strategy ’.
flexibility	A positive feature of Farnborough College of Technology’s provision was ‘the undergraduate programme that offers flexibility and choice to students’ and Halton College’s ‘ flexibility that allows maximum student choice within college resources’.
transparency	Oxford Brookes University was complimented because: ‘Module descriptions identify learning outcomes and how they are to be assessed. Current and former students expressed great confidence that they had understood in advance the criteria that would be used for assessment of their work’.
pedagogic pluralism	North Tyneside College was commended because: ‘Lecturers use a variety of teaching and learning approaches and, in most observed sessions, the learning outcomes were fully achieved’ and Newham College of Further Education for: ‘A highly appropriate range of teaching and assessment methods that deliver the curricula, and have been designed to meet the needs of mature and part-time students, particularly from the local community’.
learner participation	Positive features at Middlesex University were: ‘Examples of excellent teaching... which encourages a high level of student participation ’; and at Oaklands College ‘The examples of an excellent participative teaching style using work situations and student involvement’.
consistency	A strength of the provision at Skelmersdale College was that ‘assessment criteria are clear and marking is consistent ’ and at Spelthorne College the ‘clear, consistent and universally understood provision of support and guidance that focuses firmly on the needs of locally based mature students in employment’ was noted. By contrast, it was suggested that provision at South Bank University could be improved by addressing the need to ‘take steps to ensure consistency and transparency in the moderation and double-marking processes, the quality of feedback and links between feedback and published criteria.’
liaison and collaboration	South Trafford College was commended for the ‘close liaison between tutors and student services’ and St Helens for ‘good liaison between subject specialist and administrative support staff.’
stakeholder involvement	In the case of Liverpool Hope University College reviewers ‘were particularly impressed with the strong culture of listening to and learning from students, employers and professional bodies’.
self-criticism	At City College Birmingham the ‘reviewers found these reports (i.e. of meetings of the course team, staff-student consultative meetings, student opinion surveys, internal verification, external verifiers... and achievement data) a sound vehicle for critical self-reflection and the articulation of action plans’. ‘However, [the SAD lacked] critical reflection in several aspects of the provision.’
disseminating good practice	Dudley College of Technology was praised in the following terms: ‘The quality system is rigorous at all levels; issues are reported promptly, and action is taken to remedy any problems and to disseminate good practice , thereby closing the quality loop.’

Table 3: Pedagogic principles and some illustrative examples

Note: throughout the table emphases have been added

ers would contribute substantially to the design of the curriculum, to the provision of learning opportunities and to quality assurance and enhancement. For business educators, the concept of organisational stakeholders, 'that is those individuals or groups who have an interest in and/or are affected by the goals, operations or activities of the organisation or the behaviour of its members' (Mullins 2002, p.145), and their importance for notions of corporate social responsibility are likely to be familiar. However, while stakeholder analysis and social responsibility are often key ingredients of the business curriculum, whether their precepts should be applied to educational practice as a whole is an open question. Nonetheless, it is one that can be addressed by drawing upon the business and management literature. For example, if providers accept some degree of social responsibility for what they offer, then before involving stakeholders they need to consider the sources or bases of their legitimacy, that is their 'right to a stake in the organisation' (Naylor 1999, p.169) as well as the establishment of enabling mechanisms.

A further principle is that of *self-criticism*. In other words, good providers recognise that in educational provision perfection is a chimera and there is always room for improvement. Moreover, even if provision is considered to be of a high standard at a particular point in time, constant vigilance is required to avoid being 'blown off course' by threats from a turbulent and constantly changing environment. In this respect, self-criticism is seen as being an antidote to complacency. It is also the hallmark of the reflective practitioner (Schon 1983) and of reflective practice more generally. As Moon observes: 'reflective practice is the process of looking back in a critical way at what has occurred and using the results of this process, together with professional knowledge... to tackle new situations' (Moon 1999, p.59). Thus, by encouraging self-criticism, subject reviewers sought to engage with a key strand in contemporary professional education.

Finally, a good provider would take steps to *disseminate and embed good practice* so that it became the norm rather than the exception and was not subject to the vagaries of staffing. In short, good practice should be 'owned' by the whole department/school and not simply by a committed and innovative individual. Thus, a good provider would establish robust procedures for sharing and disseminating innovations that have proved their worth. In other words, it would exemplify some, at least, of the attributes of a learning organisation defined by Pedler *et al* (1988) as 'one which facilitates the learning and development of all its members while simultaneously transforming itself' (p.209). Arguably, given that organisational learning and creativity figure in the curriculum of many business and management courses, it is incumbent upon providers to ensure that they not only teach them but also demonstrate what they mean in practice.

Although application of the principles derived from the subject review reports does not necessarily guarantee that the resulting experience for learners will be a favourable one, they do provide an agenda for action

amongst those charged with securing improvements in quality. Clearly, they should not be applied rashly and without due consideration of context. Moreover, where principles such as stakeholder involvement are likely to be contested, a strong case for their adoption needs to be established before implementation.

Conclusion

Inevitably any quality assurance procedure which is externally imposed and perceived as alien and unnecessarily intrusive will be controversial. Subject review was certainly no exception in this respect. However, the stance adopted in this paper is that rather than dismissing it out of hand, consideration should be given to what it might contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the nature of quality in higher education. While many of the procedural aspects of subject review can be seen as counterproductive, in that they resulted in a misdirection of time and energy and that this militated against quality, it can be argued that the tacit value framework within which reviewers operated offers considerably more.

By making this framework explicit, the principles that informed the judgments of subject reviewers in determining whether provision was 'good, bad or ugly' are opened up for closer scrutiny and more searching debate. Since some of the principles are what can best be described as 'managerial' in their orientation, business and management educators potentially have much to contribute in this respect. Such a contribution can only be to the benefit of all concerned about the quality of higher education in general, and business and management education in particular.

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