



Quality Enhancement Review Case Study

Programme and Portfolio Management at Swansea University

Introduction

Within Quality Enhancement Review (QER), as it operated in 2020, universities were asked to identify areas of focus for the review, and one of the areas that Swansea University put forward was its approach to portfolio management. The review team was impressed and commended what it saw as the University's 'proactive use of well-developed processes and procedures for the effective strategic management and operational development and review of its academic portfolio to ensure continued relevance of its programmes.' The University's approach was seen as an effective business planning process, data-informed and responsive to external drivers, allowing the institution to review the viability of current provision as well as identify opportunities to develop new programmes in key strategic areas.

In essence, the University has developed an integrated approach to programme management which, by working with various offices across the institution, enables a more cohesive approach to both the development of academic programmes and their continuing review. Academics are asked to work with those offices responsible for business intelligence and quality assurance from the outset to avoid a more staged and fragmented process. The system is underpinned by the provision and use of comprehensive internal and external management information to help evaluate the value of the potential and current academic portfolio.

Historical background

The University had for some time been reviewing its approaches to both programme approval, and monitoring and review. The establishment in 2015 of a consolidated Academic Quality Services unit had provided an opportunity to review the overall quality assurance framework and introduce a systematic methodology for portfolio management.

In terms of programme design, development and approval, those involved emphasise that the development of a new approach has been a long journey from what was seen as a more traditional approach to programme development and approval; one which could be driven less by market potential and success, and more by departmental or even individual interests. Several principles were identified as key in framing a successful approach.

First, those responsible for institutional Academic Services wanted to move away from academic staff being left to develop a programme unsupported and in relative isolation which, it was felt, made the eventual success of the programme less assured. The aim was to engage with academics on programme development, including in the construction of a business case, from the idea's inception.

Second, there was a desire to move away from a context in which quality assurance processes encountered a programme proposal some way down the line, towards a more integrated approach with professional staff and academics working together to assure the quality of the new programme. The goal was to avoid the kind of 'them and us' tension that can exist between those responsible for developing 'business' and those responsible for quality and regulation. New systems would be accompanied by effective dialogue between interested parties.

Third, the objective was a more managed and strategic process based on systematic market scrutiny, comprehensive data and effective business intelligence. In part, this was driven by the University's engagement with HEFCE's [i-MAP](#) (innovation in the Market Assurance of new Programmes) project, which recommended that new programmes should be assessed early on against financial and market data, and overseen by senior institutional management. The University appointed a Head of Marketing Intelligence, and a new Programme Approval and Management system (PAM) enabled the University to have an online host for definitive programme information and relevant data. In turn, it was intended that these initiatives would increase the likelihood that a programme would attract students.

At the same time, Academic Quality Services (AQS) wanted to introduce a revised approach to quality review, going from a more traditional annual event to continuous monitoring processes - 'an ongoing journey' - which would be more responsive and risk-based. Essentially, the aim was to focus more on programmes and subject areas where challenges were emerging, while rewarding areas with consistent high performance on key metrics of student experience.

Portfolio management and programme approval

The University has what it sees as a systematic approach to portfolio management, which extends across the programme life cycle, from initial proof of concept to programme approval. Working together under the umbrella of the Programme Management Board (PMB), Academic Services, the Planning and Strategic Projects Unit, and the Marketing Intelligence Team use a business planning and Annual Portfolio Review process to review the viability of existing provision, to identify new areas of strategic priority and to identify markets for proposals.

The PMB constitutes the initial gateway responsible for monitoring proposals. It ensures that programmes align with the University's existing portfolio, strategy and market demand, but it also answers the key question around whether a potential programme will recruit. At the same time, AQS scrutinises new programme development proposals, though authority regarding final decisions on the quality and standards of programmes rests with the deliberative Programme Approval Committee (PAC), on behalf of the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) and the University's Senate.

Within the same overall structure led by the PMB, a faculty or school's academic portfolio is reviewed at least annually through the portfolio review process. It incorporates UCAS and HESA information as well as internal market intelligence data, to identify academic provision that may be subject to withdrawal or suspension. The University is confident that accessible data allows effective evaluation and decision-making, and in turn, promotes continued viability of the academic portfolio.

What makes the approach particularly effective though, is that it is undertaken online and in a context where various professional services and academic staff can more easily work together. Academic units fill in a form, provided by the Marketing Intelligence team, to receive a market intelligence report, analysing relevant internal data and external sources including HESA and UCAS. At the same time, Academic Services seek information and intelligence from academic staff and others involved in proposing the programme. It is an essentially collaborative process which sees academic and professional constituencies working together from the outset, both able to inform the programme title, content, structure, accreditation, mode of delivery and even fee. Academic staff have reported that they appreciate working with the various internal stakeholders as they design programmes, while Academic Services are less likely to hear that they are a 'brake on development' or that quality assurance is a barrier to innovation. The University is confident that the approach has allowed the University to develop high-quality courses which, at the same time, use extensive market intelligence to meet core business needs.

Programme management and review

The same generic approach has been applied to the quality assurance and enhancement arrangements for continuing programme management and review. The aim has been to implement a revised form of quality review which achieves greater integration between annual and periodic review, and a more holistic data-informed approach. The process incorporates: Annual Programme Review (APR); module review and amendment; and a quinquennial cycle for the periodic review of a subject area or programme.

Under APR, programme teams can access and utilise data from various internal and external sources including module evaluation, student performance information, National Student Survey (NSS) results, and external examiner reports, for review and enhancement purposes, such as module amendment. Academic staff are encouraged to reflect on, and evaluate against, standard metrics. Similarly, self-evaluation for quinquennial Quality Review is data-focused, drawing on a similar range of external and internal resources.

In many ways, other aspects of the approach to monitoring and review are more conventional. APR action plans form part of faculty and subject area Student Experience Action Plans which are then monitored by Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees. AQS reviews all APRs with institutional issues being raised at institutional LTC or Progression and Awards Board (PAB), as appropriate. But in feeding into that pathway, the objective is to prompt continuous engagement and change which is informed and reflective.

The context is also one in which the University is seeking to employ aspects of the differing national approaches to quality assurance adopted in both England and Wales. For the former, AQS monitors specified flags - for example, significant changes in NSS results, and goes in to review those areas. But there is also a concern to focus on the Welsh model of an enhancement-driven approach to quality.

Data

The University emphasises the fundamental significance of accurate and readily accessible management information systems for its approach to programme and portfolio management. The QAA review team recognised this by commenting favourably on the accessibility of data for evaluation and decision-making purposes. Effective use of data for evaluation and improvement is enabled by several factors.

- Power BI (Business Intelligence) has been introduced as the main institutional platform to facilitate improved access to internal and external data.
- Extensive use is made of market intelligence data in systematically planning new subject areas for the academic portfolio.
- A Portfolio Reporting Tool tracks the work being done on new, amended, withdrawn and suspended programmes, the aim being to provide live capture of how programme developments are progressing.
- Within APR, and as noted by the QAA team, successful use is made of HESA data on progression, retention and awards, as well as analysis of league table positioning for benchmarking against comparator groups.
- Student evaluation data is captured using the online EvaSys system, thereby strengthening review and evaluation by programme teams within the APR process.
- The University has introduced Assessment Reports on the Quality of University Examinations (ARQUE) which provides a statistical analysis of modular assessment outcomes allowing academic staff to reflect on performance, including anomalous outcomes.

- Graduate outcomes data, which inform the University's employability strategy, are evaluated in annual and quinquennial reviews.
- Just as importantly, the data and information are being located on a SharePoint APR hub to ensure that everything will be in one place for AQS, academic managers, and administrative and academic staff.

Monitoring and evaluation

To review the overall approach, the University has established the Academic Data Quality Committee (ADQC) which has a remit to monitor these matters and to make recommendations to the LTC. Responsibilities include streamlining the accessibility of data on academic performance, securing an improved overview of the academic data landscape, and identifying the necessary portals and processes to achieve this.

Beyond this, AQS has not yet undertaken formal evaluation of the approach's impact. However, efforts have been made to embed a reflective perspective and AQS reports that while all templates offer the opportunity for feedback, staff are more likely to pick up the phone, seeking advice or suggesting improvement. There are, though, plans to set up a stakeholder group. Also, the University is aware of the varying ability of key staff at programme level to make effective and full use of data, and is committed to making further progress in supporting staff in decision-making and review processes.

Conclusion

The University and particularly AQS, while still fully committed to securing academic standards and assuring quality, aim to redefine and fundamentally reshape core, familiar practices around both programme approval, and monitoring and review. For the former, there is evidence that the University has a more coherent business planning process which benefits from partnership working across representatives from marketing, academic staff, professional services, and AQS with its concern for regulation and quality. Use of accurate and accessible data gives confidence that the University is developing and approving viable and high-quality programmes.

For programme monitoring, there is an ambition to continue moving to a more risk-based and less cyclical approach where internal and external data sources enable an APR process rooted in high-value intervention, but only where necessary. Otherwise, programme teams can focus on continuous monitoring and enhancement.

Challenges remain. The pandemic has informed reflection on flexibility and responsiveness, and an institutional restructure has required some recalibration. However, AQS is confident that it has developed a more holistic and integrated approach to various familiar quality assurance processes, and one based on effective utilisation of data to develop a strong portfolio and enhance quality of existing provision.

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