

## Introduction

The introduction of quality assurance into higher education teaching and research has been a global phenomenon (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Kells, 1992). In the UK, both teaching and research are subject to Quality Assurance (QA) systems (referred to as Evaluation in Taiwan). However, unlike in some countries, the UK systems for QA in teaching and QA in research are quite different. Now all universities in the UK are subject to external assessment, both in research and in teaching (including administrative systems to support the teaching). In addition, each university organises its own rolling programme of internal assessment of teaching and assessment of students.

Since the late 1980's until 2003, all UK universities operated a system of QA in teaching known as Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA). This system, administered by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) involved intensive scrutiny on a 6-year rolling programme basis of each subject department in each of the 164 HE institutions throughout the UK. However, all universities wished to reduce the administrative burden on

institutions. Consequently, the quality assurance system for the evaluation of teaching was replaced by a 'lighter touch' procedure. The new system addresses both the quality of teaching and academic standards (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2001) and focuses on each individual HE institution as a whole rather than each subject department. The new system, first introduced into Scottish universities in 2003, is known as Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) (QAA, 2008) and has now been conducted in all the Scottish HE institutions on a 5-year rolling-programme basis. In 2008, a further modification to the ELIR system has been introduced to take into account the merging of two funding councils in Scotland – the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) – into a single new body now responsible for all HE and FE institutions. However, the principle of focussing the QA system at an institutional level remains intact.

The UK system of QA in research is known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Normally, it has been conducted at 5-year intervals. The

purpose of the exercise was to grade university departments by peer-review for their research strength over successive four year periods. The grading was subsequently used by the four Funding Councils (HEFCE, SFC, HEFCW and DEL) to allocate resources to each university. Reviews have been held in 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. In 2008, the single overall grading for each unit of assessment in the RAE has been superseded by a profile of each unit's research strength on a four point scale from world-leading research (4\*) to nationally recognised research (1\*) (Research Assessment Exercise [RAE], 2008). The successful delivery of the 2008 exercise was largely due to having a stable and highly professional team with sufficient time to prepare adequately for the very intensive assessment phase. Additionally, it is not easy to develop a considerable resource and expertise and implement a data collection system which is fit-for-purpose.

In developing such systems, a balance had to be struck between essential requirements and additional “nice-to-have” features. The move to reform the research assessment process by developing the REF could provide an

opportunity to simplify the data collection processes (RAE, 2009). Recently, the government in UK has decided to replace the RAE by Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and will be completed in 2014.

Over the past two decades, there have been major changes in the nature and mode of operation of UK higher education institutions. Also, researchers have explored the issue of quality assurance in UK, such as governance, framework, subject level and policy (Bellingham, 2008; Kettunen, 2008; King, 2007; Riddell et al., 2007). Surprisingly, few studies have been conducted to investigate the impacts of implementing quality assurance in the universities (A. Douglas & J. Douglas, 2006; Hoecht, 2006). Hence, the purpose of this study is to describe the quality assurance practices employed in the UK universities and analysis the impact of implementing quality assessment in the universities.

To this end, the main research questions that informed this study were:

- How do key stakeholders working in HE institutions in Scotland perceive to be the impact of