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## Archaeology and 'QAA subject review': what did we learn?

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*The authors recount their personal experience of the recent assessment of archaeology teaching in the United Kingdom.*

*Key-words:* teaching, assessment, QAA, United Kingdom

In the middle of March 2002, with the last review of a Department of Archaeology in England, the process of assessing the quality of academic courses by Subject Specialist Reviewers (SSRs) appointed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) came to a temporary halt. The programme of reviews has been in existence since 1991 and, as it happens, archaeology was one of the last subjects to be reviewed — though it was assessed in Welsh universities as long ago as 1995–96, and in Scotland the process is continuing, with archaeology yet to be done.

The editors of *ANTIQUITY* have already drawn attention to the process in an editorial (Malone 2000: 741).

The process in England and Northern Ireland started in September 2000 with Cambridge and concluded in March 2002 with Southampton. All archaeology staff in English universities and in Queen's University Belfast have been living with the 'subject review', formerly 'teaching quality assessment' or TQA, for the last 18 months, as have those in other subject areas since 1991. In this article, we want to cast an

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eye back on the experience. We were both trained as SSRs and both had much to do with the review of our own Department, and took part in seven reviews of other departments, as well as being called in to offer some guidance to others. While we had mixed feelings about taking part in the process, we learnt a lot from the experience.

The purpose of this article is to describe the process of subject review, and ask the question: what have we (by which we mean the wider academic community within archaeology) learnt from the experience? We are conscious, also, that academic archaeologists in other countries around the world may well face similar experiences in the near future. Will the British experience be mirrored elsewhere, or will others find different ways of dealing with issues of quality and accountability? We want to stress that the views expressed here are personal ones, and do not necessarily reflect the views of other reviewers — though our experience suggests that many of them are in fact shared by the rest of the team. What is written here certainly does not reflect the official views of the QAA: it will become apparent below that we have both positive and negative critical comments to make on that organization, the methodologies it has developed and related developments in higher education as a whole.

### Origins

The assessment of the quality of education in particular departments is a process that had its origins in the Thatcherite years of the 1980s and early 1990s. Conservative politicians were fond of pronouncing on the need for accountability among all public sector services, to ensure that ‘taxpayers’ money was well spent’. Specifically, the reforms of the Thatcher governments were intended to introduce market principles into public institutions, though this principle was never really introduced far into universities on the student front — rather the reverse, with the amalgamation of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ university sectors in 1992. A raft of regulatory requirements were imposed on education, health and local councils, and universities got their share, initially as a consequence of a deal struck with the lecturers’ unions over pay. Many of these related to financial and management audits, but for academics on the ground two were of primary importance: the Research

Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA).

Few things have brought about as much apprehension, indeed terror, in higher education as the prospect of ‘inspectors’ sitting in on lectures and tutorials and the thought of outsiders riffling through filing cabinets of critical examiners reports, imperfectly written (or absent) minutes of meetings, accounts of student complaints and the like. Strong men and women have blanched, shed tears or both, as the potential implications of a TQA visitation sank in and as the scare stories and Chinese whispers circulated (Halstead 2001 gives a graphic description of one department in turmoil). In the event, for many departments, the process was probably a little like a visit to the dentist: it could be painful, but turned out not quite as bad as it had seemed in prospect. Even for the best-performing departments, however, it was stressful, lengthy and incredibly time-consuming. So what was it all about, and was it worth-while?

### The QAA process

The first thing to say is that the process has changed considerably over the years it has been in existence. The Quality Assurance Agency has only existed since 1997, when the current methodology was brought in; prior to that, the process was carried out by the Higher Education Quality Council, which initially graded departments ‘excellent’, ‘satisfactory’ or ‘not satisfactory’. At that stage, inspectors (‘reviewers’) had much more freedom than they have now; they could drop into classes unannounced, button-hole students in the corridor and ask them their opinion about things, and generally make life uncomfortable for all concerned. As time has gone on, this has changed and reviewers are now subject to strict rules about what they can and cannot do. Classes to be observed must be notified in advance and feedback must be given by reviewers to teaching staff afterwards; meetings with students are formal gatherings, lasting about an hour, with the institution selecting the students to be interviewed; the various aspects to be considered are the subject of a series of formal meetings, with the agenda fairly predictable. The methodology, draft timetable for a typical visit, *aides-mémoire* and other notes were all published in the Subject Review Handbook, which can be found on the Web at <[www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)>.

A brief description of the process was as follows. For each visit, the QAA appointed a Chair and a team of specialist reviewers. The latter were subject specialists who 'volunteered' and who were trained by the QAA at a special three-day residential course; about 20 archaeologists were so trained. Their names, institutions and specialist areas are published on the QAA website.

Before the visit, departments had to prepare a Self-Assessment Document (SAD), setting out the courses offered, their aims and objectives and a description and evaluation of their facilities and procedures. The SAD and a package of other documents, including external examiners' reports, course handbooks and statistical material, were sent to reviewers three weeks before the visit. Reviewers were expected to read this material and prepare preliminary comments on it before the visit itself.

The visit itself lasted four days, usually from the Monday lunchtime to the Thursday afternoon of a typical teaching week. During this time, reviewers undertook a variety of activities. They sat in on classes, read student work, reviewed paperwork on all aspects of learning and teaching and talked to teaching and administrative staff, groups of present and past students and employers of past students from the department in question. At the final meeting on the Thursday afternoon, the grades were announced to the assembled company (usually including the Vice-Chancellor and assorted functionaries) by the review Chair; at which point anger, joy or a mixture of other emotions was released by those being reviewed.

The assessment was centred on the quality of 'subject provision'; as reviewers, we were constantly urged to place the student experience, not 'teaching', at centre stage in our deliberations. The assessment was divided up into six aspects:

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organization
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Student Progression and Achievement
- Student Support and Guidance
- Learning Resources
- Quality Management and Enhancement

Each aspect was graded from 1 to 4, with 4 representing 'attainment of the stated objectives' (not, note, perfection), and 3 representing a 'substantial contribution' but with 'scope for im-

provement'. The QAA is opposed to the adding-up of the grades into a overall total of 24, insisting that 'reviews result in a "graded profile" that indicates the strengths and weaknesses across the six distinct aspects' (Weitzman 2001). Even the most enthusiastic advocates of the process do not claim that it is an exact or precise one down to the last point. Inevitably, however, most observers do add up the scores and this has led to some confusion in the wider perception, among both academics and the general public, of what the scores mean. It has also meant that there has been intense competition to score as highly as possible, to interpret each mark dropped as a catastrophe and a mark of 24 as a major triumph. On the other hand, Chris Chippindale, a former editor of *ANTIQUITY*, in a misunderstanding of the QAA's intentions, referred to 21 out of 24 as representing 87.5% which in any other situation would be regarded as an excellent result (letter, *Times Higher Education Supplement* 29 June 2001). Similarly, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP; now reborn as Universities UK) declared that a score of 22 or above represented an 'excellent' assessment.

The final grades and reports are published on the Web, at <www.qaa.ac.uk> and <www.wfc.ac.uk> (for Wales), together with the introduction and 'aims and objectives' of the SADs. As we write, around half the reports for archaeology have been published (each is subject to a lengthy process of checking and revision after the visit), but in due course it will be possible for anyone to download and read the reports on all the archaeology departments in the UK, along with each department's self-set aims and objectives.

How did archaeology get on? At the time of writing, all results have been announced, though not all are published. No department scored less than 21. Two obtained 21, eight obtained 22, six obtained 23 and five obtained 24.

How are we to evaluate this result? What does this tell us about the quality of learning and teaching in archaeology in England and Northern Ireland? Some disciplines did better, though others did much worse. The overwhelming majority of philosophy departments, for example, got 24, leading to some mutterings about the existence of a cartel that was determined to undermine the process. Second, it is clear the departments were quick to learn from

each other as the review unfolded over the 15 months. The 20 or so specialist reviewers reported back to their own departments on their QAA training and their experience of reviewing other places and fed their expertise in to their own department's preparations. In any case, British academic archaeology is a small world; word got round about what went right or wrong at Department X, and several departments who were reviewed early on in the process were open and generous in giving feedback to others on what went well or badly. As a result, it is no surprise to see that the five departments who obtained 24 were all reviewed in the later months of the process, while conversely the two 21s were both reviewed in the earlier months. In addition, two Welsh departments were reviewed under the old methodology and both scored 'excellent'.

The aspect that was clearly the weakest was 'quality management and enhancement'; about half the departments dropped to a 3 in this area. This reinforces our general impression of University teaching. Teachers of archaeology enjoy what they do and take it seriously: they are enthusiastic, conscientious and committed — all departments scored 4 for Student Support and Guidance and for Student Progression and Achievement. However, they are not always as explicit and organized as they might be about what, precisely, they were trying to do in the classroom or about the bureaucratic procedures that documented this.

For many teachers, student learning is (implicitly) judged to happen by osmosis rather than through conscious design. Though most archaeologists would accept the need for a clear and explicit design to our research, they do not seem to think that the same need applies to our teaching — although, in many cases, the financial sums involved, not to mention the impact on young people's lives, are much greater in the latter area. The jargon that came back to haunt several departments, and the reason for them losing a point either under Curriculum Design or under Teaching, Learning and Assessment (it could be either — which indicates the fuzzy edges to the aspects), was 'lack of clarity in learning outcomes'. In other words, teaching staff had a hazy notion of what, precisely, students were intended to know or what skills they should have developed, at the end of a class, a module, or a course, and were even

more hazy about how, precisely, the criteria for assessment of modules or courses related to the students' attainment of that knowledge or those skills. At several institutions we reviewed, it seemed that the students were clearer about what they were getting from the course than some of the teaching staff.

### **Positive aspects**

What did we, the archaeological community, learn? Most departments found the exercise of drafting their SADs instructive — in many cases, the staff and students of a department had for the first time to come up with a statement of their collective philosophy. Many departments made the process of drafting the SAD a group exercise, dividing staff up into teams for each aspect. Students were also consulted in this drafting exercise. More generally, Subject Review has been bound up with a change of culture in many British departments. Twenty years ago, it was almost bad manners to question the way a colleague taught his or her course. Being a good teacher was equated with being an entertaining lecturer, not with helping students to learn in an effective manner. For the first time, as a direct result of the Review, departments were forced to ask themselves the question: what are we trying to do with our students, and how can we show that we are in fact doing it? Most would accept that we must be clear and explicit in our approach to archaeology — and this goes for our teaching as well as our research.

If twenty years ago teaching was largely unreflective, it was also the poor relation of research. Staff were appointed and promoted primarily on their research record. Now, new staff are encouraged or required to gain a teaching qualification; teaching is of increased importance in one's profile. Students' unions were supportive of Subject Review, and not through pure perverseness: they were convinced of its utility in making staff take the student experience seriously. Other laudable practices have only been introduced in many institutions as a result of QAA-related pressure. For example, many departments have introduced peer observation of teaching, in which lecturers sit in on one another's teaching and offer feedback. This is undoubtedly helpful, but we doubt this would have happened without external pressure. Likewise, the creation of Subject Centres

(that for Archaeology is part of a grouping also involving Classics and History, and is based in Leicester) would not have occurred without the funding provided by the Funding Councils for the promotion of best practice in University teaching. There has also been support for a range of projects relating to widening access, equal opportunities and so on, arising from recommendations coming out of the Subject Review process in other disciplines.

Finally, the process was largely a transparent one. The Aims and Objectives of the departments, the reports with comments both positive and negative and the grades are all there on the Web for all to see. The Subject Review Handbook itself is an open document; its jargon may be difficult, but it does lay out quite specifically what the method is. The announcement of grades and summary of the reasons was delivered face-to-face, and an important part of the review visit was that problems should be clearly 'flagged up' and should not come as a surprise at the final meeting to the department being reviewed. When colleagues complained to us that they did not understand this or that piece of jargon or aspect of the process, it was often the case that they had simply not read the relevant documentation. We would not accept a similar complaint from our students.

### Negative aspects

Undoubtedly the process is also something of a game; and the problem with games is that once academics have learnt the rules, they can play them very well. It is alleged that a member of HEFCE staff said, in relation to the constantly changing parameters of the RAE, 'The trouble is, academics get wise to things, so we have to keep changing the rules', and the same might be said for subject review. One of the strengths of the system was that departments set their own aims and objectives, and were judged on those, rather than on an externally imposed set of values; at least in theory, departments could not be penalized for having a distinctive approach, as long as they could demonstrate that they actually did what they said they did. This did mean however that departments could 'play the game' by writing a vague and modest set of aims and objectives. It was not part of our brief to assess these against any external reference points, such as the 'benchmarks' that have now been created, but to take

each department on its own terms. So we saw departments which do an excellent job with moderate student achievers and limited facilities, and deserved to be praised for it. It also meant that an important element of academic freedom was preserved. What it did not mean, however, was that a department scoring 24 was necessarily a better place than one scoring 21. It all depended on what they said they were trying to do and their success in demonstrating that they were doing it.

Since the start of TQA and Subject Review, a debate has been carried on in the pages of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, the education sections of the broadsheet newspapers and the quality weeklies. Admittedly this debate has been largely one-sided: mostly it was academics protesting about how time-consuming and futile they felt the exercise was, as well as their perception that the process represented an attack on academic freedom. The other side of the argument was usually put by officials of the QAA itself, rather than by the politicians who instigated the process. The former head of the organization, John Randall, was especially vocal in insisting that universities must be accountable, and that poor teaching must be rooted out. In this his language echoed uncannily the public pronouncements of Chris Woodhead, the then Chief Inspector of Schools for England, another appointee whose qualifications for the job were not altogether apparent to the unbiased outside observer — except by virtue of his political views.<sup>1</sup>

The debate is more wide-ranging than a simple complaint about time and bureaucracy. For instance, Shore & Wright (1999) discuss how the emergence of what they term an 'audit culture' has had negative effects on the higher education community, and how the phenomenon has acquired a 'momentum for colonising yet more areas of society. The audit phenomenon has a dynamic of its own and, like Frankenstein's monster, once created, is very hard to control'. A range of 'parasitical new professions' has arisen, in their view, consisting of the intellectuals who think up the justification for the processes, the bureaucrats who implement them and the trainers who

1 It is no coincidence that Mr Woodhead, who left his post in 2001, has become (among other things) a leader-writer for *The Daily Telegraph*. He actually taught in schools for only seven years.

become expert in handing down 'the knowledge'. As a consequence, universities have been forced to comply by setting up ever more bureaucratic structures and by appointing more and more staff specifically to deal with audit (and to instruct the academic staff in how they are to comply).

All this has been seen by some as a power mechanism, a type of discourse that appears to be neutral but in reality is ultimately political, deriving from a desire by government to control but not to be seen to do so directly. Hamilakis has considered the operation of this mechanism in the teaching and learning of archaeology; he points out what he feels to be a basic contradiction (Hamilakis 2001: 7):

While in our research, many of us have undermined the premises of objectivism, have emphasised the importance of context, and have rejected the notion of maximisation principles in the study of prehistoric economies and societies, in our educational and pedagogical practice in our life as academics we seem to have tolerated or even endorsed these ideas. We sit back and listen to countless speeches by university administrators on efficiency (abstractly defined), and maximisation. Or we ourselves implement willingly the policies of self-policing.

Many academics would not go this far; they would accept the basic premise of the accountability argument, which is embraced as warmly by the present Labour Government as it was by the Conservatives. They are aware that they are funded out of general taxation, that at least some of the time they do a job they enjoy and that once tenured they can usually expect a job for life. It is therefore not in doubt that in return for these benefits they should be subject to some scrutiny.

In any case, it is very difficult to see many of the developments in teaching and learning in terms of what Hamilakis terms 'maximisation principles'. The process may have been initiated with a Thatcherite agenda, but the current emphases on sharing best practice through Subject Centres, of dealing more effectively with issues such as disability and social exclusion and of greater reflection in pedagogy generally can hardly be seen as mindlessly right-wing. In practice 'self-policing' means getting one's hands dirty, working within the system actively to promote the academic values that are supported by all, rather than generating ideologically pure but ultimately ineffectual critique from the sidelines.

We should not forget that, hand-in-hand with the processes we have described, there came a massive expansion of student numbers in higher education and the end of the British university as an exclusively middle- and upper-class enclave. This expansion created many of the university posts inside and outside archaeology that many of those critical of 'audit culture' now occupy. For archaeologists, context has been said to be the central and defining feature of our discipline. The context of Subject Review is a complex one, which cannot be simplified in terms of the unfolding of a Thatcherite agenda.

What we do object to, however, is the culture of mistrust and cynicism that Thatcherism promoted. The process of reflection that QAA encouraged was a positive one and as reviewers we learnt a great deal about the process of teaching and learning, through becoming acquainted with the ways in which our colleagues in other departments work and what they teach their students. The abiding impression of Subject Review for most academics, however, is one of extreme stress.

An equally abiding impression is of the extraordinary amount of paper that the process of Subject Review generated. For much of the time the process was a paper-trail and nothing more. In our experience, nothing was gained or lost by observing classes. We saw some excellent ones and we saw some mediocre ones; but in neither case did it make much difference to the outcome. What *did* matter was whether the paperwork was in order, whether one could follow a trail from one committee to another, whether students had been consulted at every turn, whether external examiners' reports had been acted upon, and so on. Woe betide a department which could not show that it could document these processes! Conversely, a department might well score full marks in a given aspect if it had got its Minutes and feedback sheets in order. The former might still be an excellent place to study and the latter an uninspiring one.

This is so because, at the end of the day, the process did not allow reviewers much of a chance *really* to find out what a department was like. Sometimes errors were all too obvious and if a department owned up to them and could show it had better procedures in place for the future, it might not get penalized; those

that tried to bluster or bluff their way out often ended up digging a deeper hole for themselves. But most of the time, the reviewers simply did not have time to root out the hidden problems — the Doctor Piercemullers<sup>1</sup> and the lack of action to deal with them, the idle students who get their degrees on appeal because their many absences from class are never followed up, or the departments which give out good degrees on the basis of a restricted range of not-very-challenging assignments — let alone talk to the disaffected students, who are carefully kept well away from the reviewers. These are exaggerations, but we all recognize an element of truth in them.

### The future

Where does the teaching of archaeology in British universities go from here? On the one hand, some form of 'quality assurance' is not going to go away; whether the academic community likes it or not, governments and public bodies are going to require from academics some kind of statement about what they do and how well they think they do it; and further, they are going to require some kind of assurance that our judgements are justified. Public accountability is going to increase in importance; there are unconfirmed reports that student feedback and summary reports by external examiners will be published in some form (Baty 2002). The easiest way to silence a critic of Subject Review is to ask 'what alternative do you have in mind?'. Many critics simply want it all to go away, presumably without any concomitant drop in the funding base of academic archaeology. This is not going to happen.

On the other hand, there is now near-universal agreement that the system as it is presently constituted is excessively bureaucratic and time-consuming. The battle fought by universities to require a much 'lighter touch' in future years seems to have been won. There will probably be no more external reviews at the subject level, though universities' internal monitoring procedures will themselves be audited. In a perverse Foucaultian twist, universities will have complex internalized systems of self-discipline, which will then be the subject of review by specialist teams (specialist reviewers, *not* subject specialists, however — another example of a 'parasitical new profession').

One development which might outflank the principles of 'audit culture' is the increasing stress on the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in the first place. Most new staff now take a teaching qualification as a necessary condition of their appointment and a professional association, the Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, has been established. The promised continued funding of the Subject Centres and the higher profile of pedagogical issues generally will, one hopes, lead to a more benign future in which, to use the jargon, quality is built in to the process from the beginning rather than exhaustively and repeatedly proven through audit. But this may prove to be a naïve hope.

Secondly, the establishment of subject 'benchmarks' ( $\approx$  standards) should ensure that there is greater comparability between degrees from different institutions. Although the process of creating these benchmarks was in no way intended to remove from institutions the ability to do their own thing, i.e. create a range of different structures and specialisms, and certainly had no intention of setting up a kind of 'national curriculum' for universities, it will inevitably mean that degrees in archaeology in different places become more standardized, with a common core of knowledge and skills. The benchmarks for archaeology and all other disciplines can be viewed at <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/benchmarking.htm>> (click on 'Archaeology'; PDF format).

One potentially very significant development is the growth of similar practices in other parts of the world. Colleagues in other countries often tell us that they too are reviewed, but this usually relates (where it is comparable at all) to their research and not to their teaching. In the USA, comparable things have been happening, at least in state institutions. In continental Europe, the Bologna process is also leading towards the development of schemes for quality assurance of programmes (<[http://147.83.2.29/salamanca2001/documents/main\\_texts/bologna.htm](http://147.83.2.29/salamanca2001/documents/main_texts/bologna.htm)> and <<http://www.eaie.nl/about/bologna.html>> for general information about the Bologna process, including quality control); current debate seems concerned over whether Europe-wide schemes should be centrally imposed or evolve out of existing University structures, rather than over

the principles of audit culture themselves (Nuthall *et al.* 2002). Ireland already has a 'QAQI' (Quality Assurance Quality Improvement) process. Press reports suggest that Japan is considering a similar route (Bundy 2002). The QAA has been involved in nascent schemes in both Australia and South Africa.

Universities across the world are engaged in a debate about what they are doing, in terms of education and training, and how they should be financed. We suspect that the principles and practices we have outlined here, and our thoughts about them, are going increasingly to be embedded in the lives of students and their teachers. We also suspect that most will react negatively in the first instance, but come to some

kind of accommodation with those driving the process. Depending on your point of view, you could see this as one of three things: long-overdue self-reflection on practices in learning and teaching? Necessary realism in accommodating political reality? Or Faustian bargain with the forces of audit culture?

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## The non-fraud of the Middle Bronze Age stone goddess from Ustica: a reverse Piltdown hoax

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*The authors examine claims that the sole surviving example of relief sculpture from the Middle Bronze of Italy or Sicily, discovered in the excavations on the island of Ustica in 1991, is a forgery that was deliberately planted on the site. Their refutation is based on examination of the photographic evidence that has been published in support of these claims.*

*Key words:* Bronze Age, Ustica, figurative art, forgery, relief sculpture

In 1913, Charles Dawson discovered the first of two skulls found in the Piltdown quarry in Sussex, England, skulls of an apparently primitive hominid, an ancestor of man. The Piltdown Man, as he became known, constitutes perhaps

the greatest scientific fraud of the last century (Turritin n.d. (site accessed 28 December 2001); Harter n.d.). It was not until 1953, and after an estimated 500 articles and books were written about the remains, that the two skulls were

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