

Good Practice in Higher Education

**What is good practice?**

The definition of good practice is a much deliberated topic; however a working definition is necessary to inform understanding and identification. Within the context of higher education, good practice is generally defined as practice that is regarded as making a positive contribution, adding value to the provision and student learning experience and which is worthy of wider dissemination. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)[[1]](#footnote-1) is the independent body entrusted with monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK higher education. The QAA has usefully articulated that a feature of good practice is a process or way of working that makes a particularly positive contribution to the following judgement areas:

* the provider's assurance of its academic standards;
* the quality and/or enhancement of the learning opportunities it provides for students; and
* the quality of the information it produces about its higher education provision.

Good practice is generally defined as being anything that goes above and beyond standard practice or what is required to be done. It is not expected practice such as ‘a robust moderation process’ or ‘95% satisfaction in NSS’ or ‘returning feedback within 20 days’. Therefore good practice may include:

* established ways of working that have been modified and improved;
* innovations that have successfully addressed specific issues;
* identified ways of working that have demonstrable positive outcomes and could be transferred across other programmes/departments/faculties/HE Sector.

**An example of good practice would be:**

The adoption of the Gurus and Grasshoppers scheme.

*The scheme involves level 5 and level 6 students setting tasks for level 4 students that they feel would have been useful for them at that stage in their development. The Gurus are evaluated by the Grasshoppers, and vice versa. The aim in introducing this is to deepen communication between levels, and to give students more and earlier insight into assessment and feedback practices. Feedback from both Gurus and Grasshoppers has been very positive with the Grasshoppers (level 4 students) endorsing the worth of the Guru related tasks.*

**How to define good practice: identification, verification, dissemination and embedding**

The first stage in the process has to be **identification**. All too often colleagues are reticent to put forward examples of their practice as being “good”. There is perhaps a view that everyone is doing that already or that upon investigation it will prove to be usual or expected standard practice. Whilst this is perfectly understandable, it is worth remembering that panel members are not just looking for *exceptional* practice but anything that goes above and beyond ordinary, standard practice. Colleagues are therefore encouraged to use the mechanisms available to them such as periodic review, validation, Module Enhancement Plans (MEPs) and Programme Appraisal and Enhancement (PAEs) to identify examples of good practice and potential areas of good practice worthy of investigation.

The second stage in this process is **verification**. It is important that others within a programme team, subject area or faculty accept that examples put forward as good practice are better than the norm. However this does not mean examples should only be promoted if identified or supported by an outside agency eg an external examiner. Indeed experience suggests that practice identified by external examiners is just as likely to be what might be expected or standard as anything else. Verification of good practice

also needs to operate at team level if the examples are to be successfully disseminated and embedded. Teams should be encouraged to discuss ideas/practice put forward in an honest and robust fashion including testing with those outside their areas. This discussion is at the heart of verification. If as a result of this it is agreed that practice is solid working practice rather than good or exceptional practice, this is still a good outcome and worthy of recognition as it is endorsement of appropriate practice.

The third stage is to agree on the most appropriate method(s) of **dissemination**. These will vary according to circumstance; nevertheless, whatever methods are agreed upon need to be *proactive and systematic*. Colleagues will not find out about examples of agreed good practice unless they are communicated effectively and widely thereby increasing opportunities for enhancement. Simply placing examples on a website or in a file for colleagues to look through when they find the time will not work effectively.

It may be useful to refer to the following:

*The term “dissemination” has become a familiar part of our vocabulary within higher education and it is easy, therefore, to talk about doing it without having a real grasp of what it means, “to disseminate” or what it is you are trying to achieve by doing it. It is helpful to think about dissemination in three different ways:*

* *Dissemination for Awareness*
* *Dissemination for Understanding*
* *Dissemination for Action*

*Perhaps the term dissemination can be best described as the “delivering and receiving of a message”, “the engagement of an individual in a process” and “the transfer of a process or product”.*

Extract from ‘Creating an Effective Dissemination Strategy’ TQEF National Co-ordination

Team, 2000 see <http://www.innovations.ac.uk/btg/resources/publications/dissemination.pdf>

The final stage is **embedding**. Identifying, verifying and disseminating examples of good practice is good but if it makes little or no difference to the practice of others, the process is questionable. Periodic review panels should highlight potential good practice and ask that it be subjected to the identification, verification, dissemination and embedding stages. Any example of good practice identified during a periodic review will be included in the Enhancement Plan. In the first instance enhancement plans will be presented to Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees (FLTCs)/Subject Learning and Teaching Groups or equivalent who are required to consider any areas of good practice identified through the periodic review process. This provides a mechanism for wider discussion and reflection. Monitoring is also undertaken by Faculty Academic Committees (FACs) and enhancement plans are presented to the Academic Quality Committee (AQC) for scrutiny at a strategic level. Monitoring of the enhancement plan is undertaken six months after the review event to see how areas of identified good practice have been taken forward, disseminated and embedded within programmes, departments and faculties.

Notes:

This paper also draws upon discussions and work in this area (regarding good practice) undertaken by DMU colleagues including the Department of Academic Quality. Feedback is encouraged and will inform the definition and dissemination of good practice. Please send comments and feedback to the Deputy Head of Academic Quality, sgoddard@dmu.ac.uk

1. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)