

# Quality assurance and flexible learning

Podcast transcript

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**Professor David Webster**, Director of SOAS Foundation College

## Key

- + **KH:** Kay Hack (host)
- + **NM:** Nick Mount
- + **DW:** David Webster

## Transcript

**KH:** Quality assurance: a critical safety net to ensure the quality of provision in a diversifying higher education sector or a tether on creativity that disempowers those with expertise in learning and teaching.

Hello, my name is Kay Hack. I am Principal Advisor for Learning and Teaching and leading on the Advance HE member benefit theme, Beyond Flexible Learning. As opportunities to gain a higher education become more diverse, offering genuine flexibility in pace, place and mode of learning from a range of providers, is quality assurance more important than ever, or should we be reducing the burden of the quality assurance processes to enable and empower staff to do what they want to improve teaching and learning?

I am delighted to be joined in this discussion by two speakers who have been considering the role of quality assurance in the changing higher education sector Dr Nick Mount, Academic Director of University Of Nottingham Online and Professor David Webster, Director of SOAS Foundation College. So can we start by exploring what modes of learning your institutions are currently offering to your students Nick?

**NM:** Hi Kay. Yeah so I mean we are a broader part of the University of Nottingham which is you know a traditional, city-based university, covering all of the academic disciplines right from foundation level through to PhD, as you'd imagine. But my particular role in the university is as Academic Director of the University of Nottingham Online and we are a new investment, made about twelve months ago by the university, to develop a new, entirely, online arm of the University of Nottingham. Um, and we're focusing initially only on level seven, so postgraduate level qualifications, specifically at the reskilling and the upskilling market. So we're part of that broader university ecosystem. But we have a particular focus in online only and indeed within that, a particular focus on a type of online education for a particular group of people.

**KH:** Thanks Nick and I think that that's such an important area to be going into because yeah, with government initiatives and that recognition from employers that we're going to

need much more upskilling and reskilling of the workforce as we go forward. Thanks for it very much and David what what's happening at SOAS?

**DW:** Thank you Kay and thanks Nick for that context. Yeah, at SOAS we have a curriculum obviously which isn't quite as broad, we don't have STEM and have subjects outside the traditional areas to this, and languages that SOAS is particularly known for. But we've long had distance learning of various sorts and much of that distance learning is now moved online, of course predominantly online, and we have very face-to-face intensive courses. And what we've found, partly on a trajectory that was in place before the pandemic, but also now through it and whether or not we build it is another matter, but we've already begun to see the benefits of blended learning, of seeing staff use technology enhanced or technology enabled means for delivering their programs. And during the staggered return to something a bit like normal that's still ensuing, we've seen people using bits of hybrid teaching as well, and so we're enabling rooms and things so we have a kind of mixed bag, that's my term, of quite conventional face-to-face learning with some blended provision and via a VLE, a kind of hybrid models and then entire online distance learning programs as well.

In the development of new programs and the redevelopment of existing programs, we are trying to ask ourselves the right questions, about what is the correct mode or means for delivering which particular bit of learning in a program? What works best for a particular piece of learning and a particular set of learners, and what's the best means for delivering that? So we don't want to be overly hung up on what we've always done and what the sector has always done but be looking at what works best and what is most effective, but in that we're going to need quality assurance, I'm going to argue, I think throughout this podcast, to give us a frame for making sense of that and ensuring that as there is this kind of thriving and this letting bloom of a thousand flowers, there is some sense in which students can expect a pervasive quality to their experience and a pervasive level of standard.

**KH:** Thanks David. Yeah I think that's really interesting and I think it really picks up on that point that, the choice between online and in person shouldn't be brought down to this kind of reductive this or that, and it also speaks to some of the feedback that we've had from students as part of our Flexible by Design program, whereas what they're looking for is quality teaching whether that's online or in person, you know it's the quality of that learning experience they're interested in and they've actually moved beyond this you know, where the where the learning's situated. It just needs to be appropriate for the learning. Thank thank you both for that and that provides a really useful context as we go into our discussions. So I wonder if we could then start thinking about what the challenges have been, either in developing a completely new offer, or in terms of kind of, as David's articulated, that kind of shifting from our pre-Covid modes of delivery into these kind of more flexible modes that we're seeing now.

**NM:** Maybe if I sort of come in there because I think what we're doing at the University Of Nottingham Online really has been enormously challenging to the university. We are trying to deliver credit bearing learning, to that upskilling, reskilling professional market. So these are not undergraduate students that are coming in and spending three years with us, they're not even students that are coming and registering on a program of study to get a particular award. But they do want credit bearing learning that may be stackable down the line into award, so we're very much in the territory of this emerging area of micro credentials and, for us that's been a huge challenge because it's a different sort of, and I'm going to use the word product here, because these are products, they are bought by our learners and that development of a new sort of learning product that is standalone, yet is credit bearing, but doesn't exist within our traditional ways of building programs, causes immense challenge within a university like ours where our quality assurance processes are actually grounded and founded very deeply in this notion of study being part of a program.

And so when you say, well actually we want to offer credit bearing learning but there's no program, and it's super flexible and it's very different, the institution doesn't necessarily have the flexibility of process and flexibility of thought in place to immediately be able to accommodate that sort of innovation. And so that's enormously challenging to embed that and, you know, we need to remember that universities are cultures at their core actually, and the cultures of university are one of the strongest and most influential drivers of its direction and its future. And yet, they're grounded in often hundreds of years of history and expectations and ways of doing things, so innovation like this can be really hard. So for us right now, our big quality assurance challenge is, how do we help our QA evolve rapidly and enable us to innovate, but do that in a way that maintains the benefits of a really rigorous quality assurance approach?

**DW:** From my point of view, I think that's really interesting what Nick just said in terms of, rather than throwing out quality assurance because it doesn't meet our needs, we improve it, we upgrade it, and we adjust it to the situation which we find ourselves. I think doing that with quality assurance makes a lot more sense than flattening it, and which is in the quote that we began with.

**KH:** Yeah, thanks both I think that really takes me back to when we ran one of the very first professional development programs, completely on distance learning, for health professionals, over twenty years ago I'm afraid to say. But there, our real challenge was what were the prerequisites for coming on this course, so it was a postgraduate course but we did an awful lot of work in making sure that if people came in with work experience rather than an undergraduate degree, then they would be able but to cope with the course, and what I can see the challenge in offering these kind of micro credits, you know if it really has to be a substantive piece of learning and credit bearing, we need to make sure that when people, like you say, are paying to come onto it, they're going to have the skills and capabilities for succeeding, and how do we do that?

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**NM:** Well Kay, and I talked about at this idea of learning as a product you know, and our customers are consumers and covered by Consumer Law, so we actually have a statutory responsibility to make sure we're not mis-selling our learning. So, how we do that and how we make sure we have that flexibility, but protecting our learners and our consumers, is I mean that is an area I'm going to be getting into shortly with our quality assurance guys.

**DW:** Yeah, absolutely I think there's the challenge for quality assurance that we face, and I think many people face when we move beyond a very conventional mode of delivery, is what do we want the quality assurance function to do for us? What do we want it to assure? So we want to assure some sense of standards, but that in a sense can be done through the processes related to assessment anyway, so the mode of delivery doesn't necessarily impact on the assessment of levelness, in relation to assessment processes, assessment marking, assessment moderation, and distance learning programs and face-to-face programs have been sharing similar processes for the assurance of quality and assessed work, for significant periods of time, for OU and before.

But I think what challenges us all about remote learning online is, what do we want the quality assurance to do for us and does that actually raise a whole set of questions about what quality assurance can and can't do? And the question that I think flows from that or almost predates it is, what does excellence look like in teaching and learning? What does excellence look like in teaching and learning in the classroom? QA has never been that great at telling us that anyway and what does a quality online experience consist of. Is it different for every course or every program area? Are there consistent elements we'd hope to see on any online course that would reassure us they would give us, what the QA calls, kind of robust confidence that this program meets certain quality standards?

I think it's really important for the sector to retain a notion of quality, to resist some of the narrative we occasionally hear from government about low quality courses, as a kind of toxic condemnation of the humanities and 'non-high earning' programs. So I think when we want to talk about what quality looks like, we know what that might mean in relation to levelness and assessment and the process to go with that, but what does quality learning and teaching look like? This is a real opportunity I think for much of the sector to reflect on what quality looks like in all kinds of learning and teaching, what is it? What does a good session look like in a seminar, an online seminar and a forum?

There is significant opportunity for us to debate this, to use the scholarship of learning and teaching, to really investigate this. So I think as well as being a potentially worrying time for HE in all sorts of ways, it's also really exciting time to be in higher education. The sense of starting to, really tease out where the learning occurs, and what the best modes and means of engaging with students are, and I think a lot of that will come from a deep engagement with students about their own learning. About what has worked for them, what hasn't, and there are things I think where the face to face experience doesn't always

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work that well. Some students in some forms of learning, and distance learning, and asynchronous learning, can do amazing things if it's coupled with the kind of personal contact that often goes well with either face-to-face or synchronous interaction in remote learning.

**KH:** Yeah, thanks David I think you made so a few really interesting points there. I mean I still struggle to think about, how do we quality assure what's happening in the classroom without you know, Ofsted style boots on the ground as the previous university minister, briefly education minister, advocated, that we should be, you know, checking the quality of learning. So we need to be able to stand over our processes and say yes we know that we're delivering a quality learning experience for our students, and how do we actually, you know, assure ourselves of that? And I think that brings us to, I suppose the kind of final challenge of this podcast, thinking about what do we want quality assurance to look like so that it really does help us do that assurance and give that feedback to all of our stakeholders, whether that's government, whether that's our learners, whether that's employers, to say that we're delivering a quality product that's worth you paying your money to, to go back to Nick's first point.

**NM:** I think, you know, QA needs to kick in earlier than it often does. A lot of colleagues within the sector would see QA being bound up in the external examination role, it comes in exam boards when we're deciding what marks we're going to give our students, there might be some of it filtering into, you know, how we construct mark schemes and all of that going on. But you know, I see that as a long way down the line of QA, and at the University of Nottingham Online, we start QA from day one, so the point at which an academic team starts to you know, come to us and say we think we've got a product we want to develop with the University of Nottingham Online, we go into a design process at that point, a learning design process that has quite a sophisticated pedagogic taxonomy that underpins it, which is consistent across all of what we do.

Now that's QA, and that QA starts from day one. It then delivers very specific blueprints and design outputs which are explicit, both for the academic team but also for the learners and for potentially, their employers and other stakeholders in that learning. Which then filters through into the way we do quality assurance at the external part. So external examiners are using those blueprint documents to help them understand, are we delivering the experience we want? So you know this idea of QA being an event, which it often is and I, you know, I remember my days as a geography academic here at Nottingham, and you know, there was this one event a year when we had our exam boards and every member of, you know, of the university Geography department came together with the external examiners for an afternoon, and we went through all the marks and it was you know a big room of people. That was QA as an event, now that had a role but actually, QA is a much bigger process than that event and I think we need to start thinking about what we're doing along that process.

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**KH:** Yeah, that's absolutely right and I think, sort of taking up to David's point earlier as well, you know, going through that QA process and once you've got, you know, your systems in place then that kind of leads onto the quality enhancement cycle and the scholarship of learning and teaching. So how do we improve and go above this benchmark that we've set ourselves. So yeah, absolutely critical. David did you want to come in?

**DW:** Thank you for that. Okay, thanks Nick. Yeah absolutely I think I agree with you actually Nick about that, and I think designing good QA is a process engineering task, if you want to put it in those terms, and it's about having a process, but also, if you're having a process that starts, and I'm interested in the way you do in the Nottingham Online model, and having that QA set of processes from the very outset, from the course inception point. Because also when you do that and you get learning and teaching and scholarship academics involved early, you also begin to do something that's quite important I think in this, is blurring the line between the academic and professional services components of universities.

So there are experts in learning and teaching who might be on a professional services contract, but are actually our experts in academic content or academic delivery, and I think they kind of, the line between these people of professional services who help us get stuff done and these academics who actually know stuff is really problematic. And actually there are, you need to from the outset, use things like QA to say that we all have a variety of contributions to make, to delivering an excellent student experience. To make sure that what works for student is both excellent and of a consistent quality but also isn't dependent on one person staying or leaving. That actually it's a kind of, an institutional corporate endeavour in that sense, and the quality assurance is about kind of structuring and scaffolding it in such a way that it brings out the best of what professional services has got to offer, the academic staff respect that and that also then the professional services will listen to people's objections about why we can't do it this way, because this content is specific and has this particular need and relates to this. And that's fine, but you need we need to have such a kind of an appropriate process that those conversations aren't all taking place at the last minute, on one day about whether we do or don't approve a product.

You don't kind of get yourself ready as an army to go to war with professional services and your QA people on the day of approval and then come out sweating with your clipboard saying we got it done or we didn't get it done. It's a very..., there was quite a combative, adversarial model of QA approvals. For example I've certainly been to QA approvals on both sides of the table that sometimes have felt a bit adversarial. I think a much longer developmental, cooperative and collaborative process delivers better results than that. So it may be that actually, having to rethink some of this because of the online nature of delivery, might be an opportunity to rethink QA generally, and that allows us then to do the assurance and the enhancement hand in hand, side by side rather than the enhancement

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being something you try and get people to do once they're over this hurdle. I think seeing as a hurdle is kind of part of the problem.

**NM:** Yeah I agree and you know, you talk about that adversarial thing Dave and you're right, you know QA operates often in an incredibly adversarial manner. And I don't understand why we do it that way. There's no need and I think sometimes the academics see QA as disempowering them, which they push back against understandably, but I don't understand why we can't empower our professional services without disempowering. Or you know, it doesn't have to be both of those things happening, it's possible to empower both groups, but at the same time we do have to think carefully about changing some of our processes so we're not going into combat with each other, so we're actually supporting each other to deliver the change and the quality that we need and that's probably a change that has to come from very senior within organisations.

**KH:** Yeah, I think you're both absolutely right there and I've just recently actually seen an example of, you know, a large failure rate of a group of students, and the academic team are blaming the quality assurance processes for not allowing the students to do a resit within the semesters. They've got too many resits to do and they're all dropping out, and the quality assurance people will say, 'well actually maybe it's your teaching. Maybe it's your intake quality assurance. That's not right?' you know but it's doing that constructively. And coming together and say well actually what is our goal here? Our goal is success for students. How do we achieve that by ensuring what we're teaching and ensuring how we're actually delivering it? So yeah, absolutely, you know it needs to be a much more constructive approach.

**NM:** And we have to have shared and collective responsibility for that process. So we have to stop siloing the different bits into the different groups and actually say this is a responsibility of all of us throughout this process. And if it fails, that is a problem for all of us, not just one party or the other.

**DW:** Yeah I quite agree. I just wanted to make a key point about kind of quality assurance which I think it's sometimes overlooked when it becomes adversarial or combative in that sense. It's that one of the real goals that universities try and hit, try and aim for, is providing some form of inclusion and equity for their students and not providing an experience. It depends on who you are and who teaches you and who they think about who you are and has all forms of unconscious bias and discrimination built into it and sometimes conscious bias. And I think we sometimes are at risk of forgetting that one of the core functions of quality assurance is ensuring fair treatment, so when it was talking about the rules for resits, it's ensuring people aren't granted resits because a member of staff feels sorry for somebody and doesn't for somebody else, or feels somebody else deserves it and someone else doesn't. It's making sure the same rules apply equally to everybody, and they're fair rules, and there's been debate about what cases that may or

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may not arise, and issues and that we revise rules when they appear to be punitive or overly problematic in various ways. But that we look at our processes, our sets of regulations, our sets of rules for mitigating circumstances, for reassessing, for all sorts of things, and we ensure that every student is treated the same, every student is treated with respect, every academic is treated with respect as well. And actually, it's the rules and the quality assurance processes in the university that guarantee that we have that fairness.

And I think the idea that we might reduce our reliance on processes and rules and quality assurance frameworks, puts us at real risk of going against the advocacy for inclusion and for equity in universities, that the universities quite rightly see as kind of really important and hope to see themselves as leaders in, in relation to the rest of society more widely.

**KH:** Thanks! David and it's been really ah, interesting discussion. I think just as we wrap up, I wonder if I could invite both of you to offer any thoughts or guidance, and you can direct that at universities, at academics, quality assurance teams or even, you know, government. Hopefully new government, you know re-looking at some of these policies around the lifelong loan entitlement, you know, obviously a lot of shifting ground at the moment. So any kind of final thoughts that you would like to offer to the listeners.

**NM:** Yeah I mean for me, I think we need to recognise that to an extent QA is the jewel in the crown of the university sector in this country. It gives us a great deal and I spend a lot of my time working in partnership with ed tech providers, online education providers that are outside of the quality assured, Office for Students-regulated world, and they are very, very envious of our quality assurance and in fact, one of their key drivers, key motivators for partnering with universities is that they want to gain access to the quality assurance that we have that enables us to give that formal credit to our learning that they cannot give. So our QA is so often seen as a burden and a barrier but you know what it might just be one of the biggest jewels in our crown and one of our greatest opportunities for gaining additional value and actually, from a business perspective, generating additional revenue into our sector.

**KH:** Yeah, absolutely, thank you.

**DW:** I think that's really interesting Nick, and I think seeing QA ,and you put as a jewel in the crown, I was thinking more that it's more, but it certainly isn't a burden, that actually the freedom to do absolutely anything but nobody cares what you do. That's a real burden. Like kind of freedom is a burden, and actually I will see quality assurance more as the frame in which HE delivers its provision. And it says something about the provision. So the provision can be about any subject and be delivered in a whole variety of means, but the QA process means that if it's delivered by a university that, has degree awarding powers say, you know that you will be getting treated fairly; you'll be getting assessed by people who know what they're talking about; you'll be given marks on criteria that you knew in advance, you had access to; you had materials that were appropriate for it.

So if you're going and doing a course at a university with degree awarding powers, which has QA processes, you are getting a fair chance at doing it. You will get everything you need to thrive on that course and if, quality assurance take a view that courses don't do that, aren't giving students a fair chance to learn by giving them the criteria, by giving the materials that then relate to that criteria and appropriate assessment, that's constructively aligned to those criteria and to the learning outcomes, the university will stop that course. Will pause it, will intervene in it, will take action, will require changes of it. So I think, although it's tempting to see quality assurance as burdens and hurdles and difficulties. Actually we need to see it as something that is there to ensure that whatever we do, however innovative and exciting it is, and I think there's loads of innovative and exciting work going on in the sector, that while that is continuing, we don't lose sight of our core goals of giving students a fair opportunity to learn something and be assessed fairly on what they have or haven't learned during their time with us.

**KH:** Yeah thanks very much David. I think that's a really important point to conclude, that an equitable quality, an accessible learning experience has to be at the heart of our offer now. Thanks both for such a stimulating discussion, I'm sure you've given our listeners a lot of food for thought there. So thank you both very much.

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