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If you have any comments or suggestions about this booklet, please contact Professor Clare Morris, Dean of Student Experience and Quality Enhancement (ext. 4181, e-mail clarem@glos.ac.uk).

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If you require this booklet in an alternative format please contact Anna Donough: Tel 01242 714540 or email adonough@glos.ac.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

Congratulations on obtaining a place on one of the programmes of study offered by the University of Gloucestershire. This booklet tells you how you can now play a part in the design and operation of your course. It describes:

- how courses come to be offered at the University;
- how one course can learn from the successful experience of others, so that we can continue to improve courses for the benefit of all our students;
- how we ensure that courses and individual modules are kept up-to-date and continue to meet the needs of students, employers and professions;
- how any problems which arise with courses are discussed and resolved;
- how you can participate fully in all of this.

In other words, the booklet tries to answer the question posed in its title, “Whose Course Is It Anyway?” by pointing out that you - as students – have a large share in the ownership of your course.

One phrase which will occur frequently in the rest of the booklet is “quality assurance”. This refers simply to the processes by which the academic standards of your course, and all the courses offered by the University, are established and maintained. Everyone associated with a course is concerned with this. Staff have a personal and team responsibility for quality, and you also have an active part to play. It is very difficult to have an effective quality assurance system unless students are fully involved. You are the people who are in closest contact with the day-to-day operation of your course; you are thus in an excellent position to know when things are working well – and when they aren’t.

Much work related to quality assurance is based on committees. We all know the common reaction to committees: “a waste of time”, “a lot of talk and no action”, “student opinion is asked for but never taken seriously”. This can be true ... but only if you are passive and let it happen. We hope this booklet will persuade you that student involvement is valuable, necessary, and produces results. There are plenty of examples in the past of student views being crucial to major decisions reached by the University: the current structure of the Undergraduate Modular Scheme is a case in point where student votes at an Academic Board made the difference in choosing between two different proposals.

But participation doesn’t always mean sitting on committees. The booklet also explains a range of other ways in which your views can be made known.

Another idea related to quality assurance is ‘quality enhancement’. While quality assurance is concerned with making sure that our courses meet the appropriate standards, quality enhancement relates to the ways in which we try to continuously improve the quality of your experience as students, particularly, though not exclusively, in terms of the learning opportunities provided for you. Here also your input is vital; only you can tell us what makes for an effective learning environment, and help us to plan improvements in the support and services which we offer.

The purpose of this booklet is to help to increase your participation in quality assurance and quality enhancement. It:

- describes how things work in the University;
- gives advice on how to get involved;
- shows how through partnership between staff and students we can maintain and improve the quality of courses, both for you and for those who will follow you in the University.

Note on Definitions

Where terms arise which may be unfamiliar, definitions are generally supplied (see Section 6 for Glossary with a full list). However, a few key terms need clarification at this stage:

1. In the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Modular Schemes, students register for **Courses** which are the main academic units used to gain a specific award. A Course’s overall academic co-ordinator is the **Course Leader** and its major management and development committee is the **Course Board of Studies**.
2. In some parts of the University, individual courses in similar subjects have been grouped together into larger units, called **Course Groups**. The person with overall responsibility for the Course Group is the **Director of Studies**.
3. The key body in which students’ views are considered and corresponding actions planned is the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC). It is left to the discretion of individual Faculties and Departments to organize SSLCs in the most

appropriate way to meet the needs of their students, but every course will be invited to send representatives to an SSLC. The SSLC system in its present form is being newly introduced from September 2008, so one of the things we'll be asking you about during the course of the year is how it's working.

2. HOW THE UNIVERSITY WORKS

How your Awards are planned and managed

University Awards

Having, like all other UK universities, been granted degree-awarding powers by the Privy Council, the University awards its own certificates, diplomas, undergraduate degrees, and postgraduate degrees, both taught and research. In addition, the University offers a small number of EdExcel Certificates and Diplomas (notably HNDs and HNCs). We also offer courses leading to a number of professional qualifications, such as CIPD, and short professional courses, often known as Certificates of Professional Study (CPS). Many of our programmes are recognised by relevant professional bodies such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the General Social Care Council, and the Law Society.

When a Faculty or Department comes forward with an idea for a new award, the proposal must go through a rigorous process of approval before it is permitted to recruit students. This includes a scrutiny of the content and standards of the course, and of the learning resources (staff, library, IT, studio space etc) available to support the learning of students on the course. This process is generally known as **validation**.

Once an award has been approved and has recruited students, the University must ensure that standards are maintained and that the content remains up-to-date and relevant. It does this through processes of continuous monitoring and evaluation, and through a process of **periodic review and revalidation (PRR)**.

Validation

The path leading to the launch of a new course normally starts at least twelve to eighteen months before the first students arrive. Once the University has decided that it wants to go ahead with the development, a development team will be set up by the department intending to offer the course. This includes academic staff from the department, and often involves others such as learning centre staff with suitable subject expertise. The development team works to put together the detailed syllabus for the course, the content of individual modules, and other aspects such as the approach to assessment. The team needs to ensure that the course in its final form is of a suitable standard and will fit with the University's overall structures and regulations, and also that the standards and content of the course are consistent with nationally-established

standards and benchmarks. For this reason, the development process will involve seeking the views of academics from other universities, and where relevant of professional practitioners. In this way we can be sure that the standards of an Honours Degree in, for example, Law at the University of Gloucestershire are comparable with those in other UK universities, and also meet the needs of the profession.

If the course being developed is a replacement for an existing course, or will have an impact on students on other courses, then the development process will probably include discussions with representatives of the students who might be affected. Such student contributions are a vital part of the process, so if during your time in the University you are invited to participate in this kind of activity, please do so – your opinions and views will be taken seriously in the planning and approval of the new course.

Once the development team has finished its work, the University sets up a validation panel – a group of experienced staff from across the University, together with an external member from another university. The validation panel reads the documents describing the new course, and holds a meeting with the development team to discuss the proposal. The University sets clear criteria which must be met in order for a new course to be approved. Only when the development has been approved by the validation panel (acting on behalf of the University) can students start to study on the new course.

Annual Monitoring

This term is used to describe the methods which a course uses to find out what is going right and where there is scope for improvement. Each course is required to produce an Annual Monitoring Report, using information gathered from a variety of sources during the year. Two aspects of the report in particular benefit from your contributions:

1. One of the key areas involved is your evaluation of the modules you are taking. This is often done by means of questionnaires issued at regular intervals but sometimes by other methods including open student meetings. Although the whole review process may seem bureaucratic, we urge you to complete questionnaires and surveys when you are invited to do so. Their findings will be discussed at a variety of committees, and changes - often

substantial ones - will be made as a result of what you say.

2. Course Review reports also incorporate matters arising from the regular meetings of the Course Board held during the year, and from the meetings of the Staff-Student Liaison Committee. In this way, student comments can have a major impact on decisions made about the future direction of the course.

These two aspects, and the way you can contribute to them effectively, are discussed in more detail in sections 3 and 4 below.

One important element of the Annual Monitoring Report is the Action Plan, which sets out the ways in which matters raised in the report, including those arising from student comments, are to be addressed during the next academic year.

The Annual Monitoring Report is considered by a panel at Faculty level, which includes student representatives. The student view can thus be incorporated into the comments made by the panel, which are passed back to the course team for consideration.

The reports on the annual monitoring process make their way through the University's committee structure, being considered by quality committees at Faculty and University level and finally by Academic Board. Student representatives sit on each of the committees, providing a further means by which the student voice can impact on the review process.

Periodic Review and Revalidation (PRR)

Once a course has been approved for delivery, it cannot simply go on running forever – the University needs to verify from time to time that the content of the course is remaining current and relevant, and that students continue to be offered a good learning experience.

For this reason, at regular intervals (normally every five years) the University subjects all its courses to a process of Periodic review and Revalidation. This involves the course team engaging in a thorough reflection on the way the course has operated over the five-year period, and making any proposals for major change which are necessary to keep the course up-to-date.

As for the initial validation, the University then sets up a review panel to scrutinize the outcomes of the review. The panel will hold meetings with both staff and students involved with the course, and the views of students carry considerable weight when the panel makes its recommendations to the University. If the panel judges that all is well with the course, then it will be revalidated to run for a further period – normally another five years.

Other forms of review

From time to time, the University sets up working groups to examine particular aspects of its operations. These are known as Thematic Reviews; recent reviews of this kind have covered Anonymous Assessment, Work-based Learning and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance, among other topics. All these working groups include student representatives, usually nominated by the Students' Union.

The University will also seek students' views when contemplating major policy changes which impact on students. Thus when changes to the structure of the academic year were being planned, officers of the Students' Union took part in the planning process. It was then their responsibility to make sure that they discussed the issues involved with the student body, and effectively represented the majority view.

Groups of staff from the 'centre' of the University visit the academic departments on a regular cycle, to hold discussions with staff and students, to find out about any particularly good things which are going on at a course level, and to feed back to the University's senior management any concerns which need to be addressed. If you are asked to take part in the discussions during such a visit, please do so!

External Reviews

Together with all other higher education institutions, the University is subject to external processes which review our academic quality. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) conducts "institutional audits" of quality assurance arrangements in all universities, which examine academic standards and students' learning experiences. These are carried out by visiting teams mainly composed of staff from other universities, who are always keen to speak to students and to discuss with them their experience of studying at the University. Students are also invited (generally via the Students'

Union) to make a written submission in advance of the QAA's visits. Visiting teams may also examine summaries of student feedback on modules. The University's next Institutional Audit is scheduled for May 2010, so many of you will be here when it takes place.

Students on programmes funded by the Teacher Training Agency may be involved in reviews by OFSTED, and in many areas (for example, Law and Social Work) professional accrediting bodies may also seek student input as part of their accreditation process.

Who does what

Staff-Student Liaison Committees

Every taught course in the University will have representation on a Staff-Student Liaison Committee. It is at this level that you may feel you can have most impact since it is the closest to the actual operation of the course you are taking. It is worth remembering though that such committees concentrate on certain business.

They do:

- focus on the overall experience of the students on the courses within their remit;
- consider related matters such as campus facilities and learning resources;
- consider any proposals for changes or improvements to the courses;
- pass on any matters which cannot be dealt with locally to higher-level committees within the University.

They don't:

- discuss the problems of an individual student (this is a matter for the student and his/her Personal Tutor, Module Tutor or Course Leader);
- try to solve problems with accommodation or equipment (the Committee may discuss these and pass on its concerns to the Head of the relevant Department, or University management which has responsibility for resolving these matters);
- discuss perceived problems with an individual member of staff (this is the job of the Head of Department although discussion of general issues relating to overall teaching and learning methods is welcome and necessary).

Course Boards of Studies

Every course (or group of courses) has a Board of Studies which oversees its operation. Membership of the Board of Studies consists mainly of the staff teaching on the course or courses. The Course Board considers all matters to do with the day-to-day running of the course, and makes plans for its future development. Student representatives will be invited to attend the Course Board whenever matters of substance affecting the student experience are to be considered. The Course Board also receives notes of the meetings of the relevant SSLC, so that it can take note of the student views expressed there.

Departments and Faculties

Every course in the University belongs to a Department. In turn, each Department is also part of one of the University's four teaching Faculties, one for each campus. The Faculty Dean also has responsibilities for quality but much of his or her work is to do with making sure that the staff and resources needed to run courses are available and properly organised.

Student Affairs Committee

The Student Affairs Committee (SAC) is the central University committee which oversees matters relating to the student experience. All SSLCs present an annual report to the SAC, which has overall responsibility for student representation. All the sabbatical officers of the Students' Union, plus a number of other students, are members of the SAC.

Executive and Senior Management Group

At University level, the Vice-Chancellor, with advice from the Executive and Senior Management Group, has ultimate responsibility for the operations of the University. The Executive consists of the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Director of Resources, Director of Marketing, Development and Communications, the University Registrar and Secretary, and the four Faculty Deans. The Senior Management Group includes the members of Executive together with the three Deans of Academic Development plus the Academic Registrar, Heads of academic Departments, and a number of other senior staff. These groups meet regularly to review the University's overall direction, discuss current issues, and plan for the future.

If you are wondering why the University has so many

layers of responsibility, it is worth remembering its size. With over 7,000 students, almost 300 academic staff, and nearly 500 administrative, technical and support staff, it is a large employer in the region and comparable to a medium sized company.

Students' Union

The Students' Union has a team of sabbatical officers one of whom, the President, has direct responsibility for academic affairs. The President is a member of Academic Board, the Academic Standards and Quality Committee and all other University-wide committees. He or she can also assist with academic appeals as well as providing information on procedures and points of contact in the University. Other sabbatical officers, particularly the Education and Welfare sabbatical, are also members of various central committees.

3. HOW TO PROVIDE USEFUL FEEDBACK

Introduction

At the end of each of the modules which you study during your time in the University, you will be asked to provide feedback giving your views on various aspects of the module. This may be done via a formal questionnaire, or via more informal mechanisms such as group discussions. However, feedback is only useful if it is provided in a considered and thoughtful way. These notes have been prepared to answer some of the questions often asked about the feedback process, and to help you to make sure that your feedback is a really useful contribution to the University's quality assurance processes.

Why provide feedback?

Like most organisations and businesses today, the University and its staff operate on a basis of continuous improvement. So we are constantly looking for ways in which we can improve your learning experience. We can only do this if you tell us about that experience – not only about any problems which may need to be addressed, but also about the things which worked well, so that we can spread good practice to other modules.

What does useful feedback look like?

Think about the feedback which you get on your assessments when they have been marked. What makes that useful – or not? This will give you a good guide to making your own module feedback useful. In particular:

Be constructive and specific: a comment like 'This essay was no good' does not give you any guidance as to how you could improve your future performance. In the same way, comments like 'the lectures were terrible' don't help the lecturer to do better in the future. Were the lectures too fast, so you felt lost? – or too slow, so you were bored? Did you find it difficult to see the relevance of the material to your interests? Or maybe you failed to enjoy the module, not because there was anything wrong with the way it was taught, but simply because you made a mistake in your option choice and the module turned out not to fit in with your interests. Use the opportunities for open-ended comments on most feedback questionnaires to explore these issues.

Tell us what works as well as what doesn't: you want to know what is good about your essay, as well as what could have been better. So let us know the things in a module which you enjoyed or found particularly helpful – then we can keep on doing them, and

encourage other modules to adopt similar ideas.

Did you do your bit?: we use the phrase 'learning and teaching' to make it clear that education only takes place when there is participation from two parties – the student and the teacher. You can't expect to get the most out of a module if you do the absolute minimum of work, going to lectures and doing the assessments – you need to read the recommended books or articles, prepare for seminar discussions, and so on. So if you feel that you did not get much benefit from a module, ask yourself whether you put enough into it.

Try to be objective: you may be taught by a dozen or more different lecturers during your time at the University. It would be surprising if you didn't find some more likeable than others. But you aren't being asked for feedback on whether you *like* the lecturer as a person – the point is whether they were effective in helping you to learn. So try not to let questions of personality cloud your judgment.

Lecturers have feelings too: if something about a module is not working well, you need to say so, but please do so in a considerate way. Comments such as 'Dr H is a hopeless lecturer' are neither helpful nor informative, and may result in the rest of your feedback being discarded. Your comments are anonymous, but a good way to test the suitability of a comment is to ask yourself 'Would I make this comment if I had to put my name to it?'

Don't lose your opportunity to be heard: you may begin to feel rather tired of completing feedback questionnaires, but remember that your input really does make a difference, as explained in other parts of this booklet. We take it seriously – all we ask is that you do too.

4. THE NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY

Every year, a survey of student opinion is carried out on behalf of the bodies which fund higher education. All final year undergraduates at higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are invited to respond. The survey questions cover matters related to the quality of learning and teaching on courses, including assessment, learning resources and personal development. The results of the survey are published on the internet via the Unistats website (www.unistats.com), broken down by subject and by institution. There they can be accessed by students considering applying for a particular course or university, and by the general public.

The survey is carried out by Ipsos-Mori, an independent market research agency, and has the full support of the National Union of Students. The University provides contact details of students eligible to participate, and works with the Students' Union to publicise the survey, but is not otherwise directly involved. The survey takes place during the Spring term, and the results from the 2008 survey will be available shortly at www.unistats.com.

If you are contacted and asked to take part in the survey, please take the opportunity to do so - you will be providing valuable information for students who follow you. You can find more details of the survey at www.thestudentsurvey.com.

5. HOW TO GET MORE INVOLVED

What to do if you want to be a Student Representative

Student representatives for committees are either elected or nominated. In the case of SSLCs, student representatives are usually elected by other students. All committee vacancies are filled early in the first semester – watch out for details of elections in your area.

Do consider standing for election if you can: you will be gaining a better insight into how your course works and you can ensure that important decisions about it are not taken without student views being taken into account. To be able to say that you have been a student representative also adds a valuable dimension to your CV, and the student representative training programme, organized via the Students' Union, which is available to all student representatives will enable you to acquire skills which will be useful in future employment.

What to do if you are a Student Representative

When you become a Student Representative, you will be given a copy of a booklet (*Speaking Up for Students*) which clarifies the role of the student representative, offers advice on carrying out the role effectively, and is used in conjunction with the student representative training programme which is available to you. A special e-mail address for the student representatives for each course is available; you will be notified of this address when you take up your post.

What to do if you are not a Student Representative but want your view to be heard

You can find out who your student representatives are by looking at Course noticeboards. Try as far as you can to help your elected student representatives by using the opportunities that they create to gather your opinions. It can be depressing for those who are doing their best to put forward student views if it is a struggle to find out what such views might be. Be ready to contribute items which are of concern to you and, if possible, talk them through with your representative. Giving a range of possible constructive solutions is also a good idea otherwise you may raise an issue but find that it is resolved in a way which you didn't anticipate and don't much like. Be prepared to let your reps know about the good aspects of the course, as well as any problems. An email address for the student

representatives for each Course is available and you will be notified of this shortly. Please make use of it to contact the student representatives for your course.

How to contribute outside the Committee Structure

Personal Tutors

All of you will have a Personal Tutor and access to the staff of a Student Helpzone. Part of the purpose of these staff is to help you with any difficulties, either individual or collective, which arise during your studies. If something is bothering you then say so promptly. These networks are frequently used to pick up issues and problems which may be of concern to several students and your constructive comments are more than welcome. Sometimes, you may have reservations about doing this: there is a feeling that a student who raises problems might be seen as a troublemaker. You should not worry about this. If your comments are constructive and are made in the spirit of improving the quality of your course, then they will be accepted as such.

Saying what you mean, meaning what you say

Outside the network of Personal Tutors and Student Helpzones, all of you will come to know people who can help if there is something on your mind. They might be other members of staff, Students' Union Officers, those working in the Student Helpzone, even senior staff such as your Faculty Dean. The University wants to be an open community and you should not hesitate to discuss any issue on which you have a view. However, remember your personal responsibility as a member of that community when you do so. We all have individual gripes and love to sound off about them. Some of the best gossip and rumours are started that way. To have concerns - and to have some constructive thoughts on how to deal with them - is a much better way forward than simply keeping things to yourself or grumbling in private.

Spreading the message

"The dissemination of good practice" is another phrase which you may frequently hear if you begin to become involved in quality assurance work. Basically, it means one course borrowing good ideas from another course. Staff are regularly involved in meetings and workshops which are planned to allow them to swap ideas.

However, we want to repeat the message that you are

often in the best position to help this spread of good practice. You will often be taking a combination of modules which involves going from course to course and thus you will experience a wide range of teaching and learning styles, different assessment patterns and methods, etc. You are ideally placed, therefore, to make comparisons on a daily basis that staff cannot. To put it bluntly, if you think that one module does something much better than another, then it is an enormous help if you can make that known either through the committee system or the other networks. This will not be interpreted as negative criticism: staff are always seeking to find examples of good practice to adopt and you can play your part in helping them.

6. CONCLUSION

At some time or another, every one of you will be involved in the activities described in this booklet. Some will take a more direct role as a member of a committee; others will perhaps be included in a meeting discussing a new course or reviewing an existing one; some will simply help by expressing their views in an informal way to other students or staff. No one can spend three or four or however many years in the University without leaving some mark on it. You might excel academically, you might represent the University at sports, you may be involved in the Students' Union or in Rag Week activities, you may take part in concerts, plays, exhibitions, or other aspects of the cultural and social life of the University. Getting involved in quality assurance is another way to make your mark. Influencing the quality of your course now and for those who follow you is a positive and worthwhile activity.

Remember that you, and only you, can tell the University what it is like to be a student on your course.

6. GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

GLOSSARY

Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC)

A sub-committee of Academic Board which deals with University-wide aspects of academic quality assurance and helps to plan and implement academic policy and developments. The Chair is the Dean of Student Experience and Quality Enhancement

Academic Board

The principal University policy-making committee for academic matters. It has overall University responsibility for the quality of all courses. The Chair is the Vice Chancellor.

Course Boards

Key committees at the course level responsible for day-to-day operation and for maintaining and improving quality. Chaired by the Course Leader or Director of Studies.

Edexcel

A national body which awards all BTEC National and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. Under a Licence Agreement with Edexcel, the University is responsible for validating and reviewing its BTEC programmes.

Faculty Academic Standards and Quality Committee (FASQC)

Faculty-level committees with oversight for initial validation and review exercises. It is generally responsible for quality assurance within the Faculty. The FASQC Chair is the important contact.

Learning & Information Services

A Department which offers co-ordinated support for student learning. Includes all libraries, media and information technology services. Contact Learning & Information Services for further information.

Modular Schemes

Both Modular Schemes (Undergraduate and Postgraduate) have a central academic management team with an associated committee structure. Contact the Dean of Academic Frameworks for further information.

Quality Assurance Handbook

A University manual which describes in detail the processes used to launch new courses and to review existing ones. Copies are available through the Academic Registry, or via the Academic Registry (Quality) web pages.

Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC)

A committee covering a course or group of courses, whose primary purpose is to consider matters of concern to students. All courses covered by the SSLC send representatives to the committee.

Student Affairs Committee (SAC)

The central University committee with responsibility for matters relating to student representation and the student experience. Chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

ABBREVIATIONS

You will soon discover that many meetings in the University are fond of acronyms and abbreviations. The following list should help in translating these.

ASQC Academic Standards and Quality Committee

AB Academic Board

CAMS Credit Accumulation Management System

CATS Credit Accumulation & Transfer System

FASQC Faculty Academic Standards and Quality Committee

HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI Higher Education Institution

HNC/D Higher National Certificate/Diploma

LIS Learning & Information Services

OFSTED Office for Standards in Education

PMS Postgraduate Modular Scheme

QAA Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

SU Students' Union

UMS Undergraduate Modular Scheme