The Quality Enhancment Project: A systemic intervention for improving teaching and learning

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Abstract

The Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) is a national initiative to promote student success in higher education. The Council on Higher Education, which is responsible for quality assurance and promotion, initiated the project following a cycle of institutional audits. The QEP is intended to lead to sustained enhancement in teaching and learning. This paper provides a reflection on the shaping and final formulation of the project, using Kotter's 8-step process for leading change as a framework.

Introduction

The South African Higher Education landscape has undergone major changes in the past decade. When the first democratically-elected government took office in 1994 there were 36 public higher education institutions (HEIs) with disparate histories. Prior to 1994, HEIs, like many institutions operating under apartheid, were supposed to cater for particular racial and even cultural groups. The historically white HEIs were divided into two categories by language of instruction—English or Afrikaans—with concommitant differences in idealogy. Separate universities existed for students from various African language groups, as well as for Indian and so-called Coloured (mixed race) students. In addition, 11 institutions had been established as Technikons (polytechnics) rather than universities, as they offered technically-focused diplomas rather than degrees.

As a means of improving equity and quality, as well as in response to international trends in higher education, a nationally-mandated restructuring of the higher education landscape was implemented in 2004. A process of merging, reconceptualising and renaming resulted in a new collection of 23 public HEIs—11 universities, 6 universities of technology and 6 comprehensive universities (offering both diplomas and degrees). In the years preceding the mergers, the government also set up a unified quality assurance system for higher education, with the creation of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) at its core. The CHE, established in 1998, is an independent statutory body responsible for quality assurance and promotion in South African higher education. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a permanent committee of the CHE, is responsible for all decisions related to quality in higher education.

In 2004 the CHE began the process of conducting comprehensive audits of HEIs. By 2011 all public and several private[1] HEIs had been audited. Given the history of, and changes in,

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[1] South Africa has over 100 private HEIs that vary in size, focus and programme level, from small, single-focus diploma-granting institutions to large institutions offering multiple qualifications up to PhD level.

South African higher education, such an intensive quality assurance exercise was necessary. Moreover, the detailed institutional audit reports, produced by panels of experts in consultation with hundreds of role players from each institution, provided very valuable information on institutions' strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement in the three core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement, as well as administration, management and governance. However, the audit process was slow and resource-intensive. In 2009 an external evaluation of the HEQC recommended that in the next quality assurance cycle the focus should be on quality promotion (http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/external_evaluation_HEQC_report_february_2009.pdf). While the first cycle of institutional audits was being completed, the CHE held initial discussions with HEIs on how best to do this. This led to a consensus that there should not be another round of comprehensive institutional audits over the next few years. Instead, there should be a national focus on improving teaching and learning, particularly at the undergraduate level, which accounts for over 80% of student registrations. This focus is necessitated by the combination of low participation rate, only 17% of 20 to 24-year olds in 2011, low throughput rates and stark racial bias in student success.

In the last quarter of 2012 the author, who has a strong background in teaching and learning development rather than quality assurance, was appointed as director of institutional audits. By the end of the year, after several months of background research and intensive discussions within the CHE and HEQC, agreement had been reached that the next cycle of activities would be formulated as the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), with a focus on student success across the entire higher education sector.

The next sections contain a discussion of the participatory process that was followed to shape the project, the various dimensions of the project and the anticipated outcomes. The discussion is limited to engagement with the public HEIs, which account for over 90% of South Africa's higher education students. A separate process is being followed with the private HEIs. The QEP provides an opportunity for strategic education development at both institutional and national levels.

Shaping the Quality Enhancement Project

In December 2012 a draft framework for the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) was approved by the HEQC, in which the focus was on student success, defined as:

> *Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable.*

In the draft framework the QEP was conceptualised as different from the audit process in several fundamental ways:
- It would be inductive, relying on inputs at each stage in order to determine what would happen at the next stage, as opposed to the deductive approach of specifying criteria to be addressed;
- It would involve all HEIs simultaneously, rather than working with them sequentially;
- It would be iterative, comprising more than one cycle of a set of activities, rather than a single cycle;
- Different processes would be used at different points in the QEP, rather than utlizing the same processes throughout.

- It would be designed to enhance not only individual institutions but the higher education system as a whole through structured collaboration.

Much of 2013 was devoted to shaping the QEP through numerous activities involving engagement with hundreds of role players across the country and several key international players. From the start it was recognised that helping the sector make the shift from quality assurance to quality enhancement necessitated a change management process. A small advisory group was assembled in February, which included a facilitator with experience in change management. She introduced us to the work of Harvard professor and change leadership expert John Kotter (www.kotterinternational.com), who has studied and facilitated change for over thirty years. Although Kotter's work was developed within a business context, much of it can be adapted to a higher education context. Kotter identifies eight steps for leading change:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
   Help others see the need for change and they will be convinced of the importance of acting immediately.
2. Creating the guiding coalition
   Assemble a group with enough power to lead the change effort, and encourage the group to work as a team.
3. Developing a change vision
   Create a vision to help direct the change effort and develop strategies for achieving that vision.
4. Communicating the vision for buy-in
   Make sure as many as possible understand and accept the vision and the strategy.
5. Empowering broad-based action
   Remove obstacles to change, change systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision and encourage risk-taking and non-traditional ideas, activities and actions.
6. Generating short-term wins
   Plan for achievement that can easily be made visible, follow through with those achievements and recognize and reward those who were involved.
7. Never letting up
   Use increased credibility to change systems, structures and policies that don't fit the vision. Hire, promote and develop people who can implement the vision. Reinvigorate the process with new projects, themes and change agents.
8. Incorporating changes into the culture
   Articulate the connections between the new behaviours and organizational success, and develop the means to ensure leadership development and succession.

The process of establishing a sense of urgency was greatly assisted by the release of three publications by the CHE's Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate in late 2012 and 2013, two of which provided statistics on throughput rates for the 2005 and 2006 cohorts of entering students (CHE 2012, 2013a) and the third used those statistics, together with other, in-depth research, to propose that the current duration of undergraduate degrees should be extended for the majority of students (CHE 2013b). The data on throughput rates are alarming. For the 2006 cohort of entering students, only 29% completed three-year degrees in the prescribed three years, and even after six years only 56% had completed their degrees[2], despite the fact

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[2] These figures exclude students enrolled at the University of South Africa, the country's large open university.

that only 17% of 20 to 24 year-olds were enrolled in higher education. For black African students the percentages of students completing in three and six years are 20% and 50%, respectively, as opposed to 43% and 65%, respectively, for white students. These figures show that the South African higher education system is highly inefficient, as well as racially biased in terms of outcomes. Such throughput data were used in discussion documents and presentations on many occasions during the year.

The creation of a guiding coalition is still underway. Kotter identifies four characteristics of an effective guiding coalition: power by virtue of position, expertise, credibility and leadership. The advisory committee identified a few university Vice-Chancellors who would be likely champions, including a member of the committee itself. In addition, Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs) academic or teaching and learning were identified as key role players. The CHE organised a meeting of DVCs in February in order to present the QEP concept and obtain their responses and suggestions for developing it further. The objectives of the QEP received universal support, but concern was expressed about how they would be acheived. Concern was also expressed about how an environment could be created in which productive collaboration among universities would take place, given the prevailing competitive ethos in South African higher education. DVCs were asked to discuss the draft QEP framework with their institutions and send feedback to the CHE.

According to Kotter, an effective vision for change has six characteristics. It is imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible and communicable. At the beginning of the year, the vision of promoting student success through the QEP at both institutional and national levels was imaginable, desirable, flexible and communicable. However, the DVCs were not convinced that it was feasible, particularly the collaborative aspect, as indicated above. This was partially because the mechanics of how to run the project had not yet been worked out, and partially because there seemed to be so many structural obstacles in the way, such as funding and competing demands on institutions. It was also not sufficiently focused—asking institutions to take steps to enhance student success was too vague and too broad a request. Although it was originally thought that specific focus areas could emerge inductively during the QEP, it was soon realised that HEIs wanted more direction and that the starting point for institutional engagement needed to be specified.

Analysis of the institutional audit reports from the first cycle led to the identification of seven factors that impacted student success: teaching, assessment, curriculum, learning resources, student enrolment management, academic student support and development and non-academic student support and development. Aspects of these seven factors were combined to form four focus areas that could, it was thought, be tackled immediately by institutions in order to execute Kotter's step 6, generating short-term wins.

After the DVCs meeting, the vision for buy-in was communicated to various constituencies over the next few months. Quality Assurance forums in March provided an opportunity to present the QEP concept to QA Managers from HEIs and to a number of statutory professional bodies, including those governing certification requirements for health practitioners, engineers and accountants. In May and June four focus group meetings were held in different parts of the country, comprising five or six members of senior management from a total of eight institutions that together represented the diversity of South African HEIs. Each meeting lasted three hours and was used to present and get feedback on the QEP concept, test the proposed four focus areas and solicit suggestions of what input from institutions should be requested by the CHE. In May a presentation on the QEP was also

made to the members of the Institutional Audit Committee (IAC), a standing sub-committee of the HEQC. Discussions with all of these role players provided clarity on what information HEIs should be requested to provide in the first part of the QEP process. In early August a 4-hour workshop was held jointly with the IAC and the advisory committee, which included a discussion of refined focus areas and a proposed format for institutional submissions.

In June the author visited the Scottish Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which created its quality enhancement framework in 2003, and attended an international conference the QAA organised on innovation in higher education. In Scotland, the DVCs for learning and teaching from all HEIs are part of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), whose strategic aim is to, "ensure that our HE institutions work together to develop, foster and embed a culture of quality enhancement in learning and teaching, through effective partnerships involving staff , students and other stakeholders."
(http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec) Speaking to members of SHEEC and the Scottish QAA clarified the need to not only communicate with DVCs but to involve them in a co-leadership role in the QEP and to work towards a national leadership group of DVCs.

The process of communicating the vision took place on a much larger scale in the third week of August. Three one-day regional symposia on promoting student success were held in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town, led by internationally renowned scholar in this field, Vincent Tinto, Distinguished Professor in Education from Syracuse University in the USA. A presentation on the QEP was also given at each symposium. The symposia provided the opportunity for a large number of people from HEIs to start thinking, individually and collectively, about promoting student success. Vincent Tinto's four presentations on each day provided a sound scholarly basis for improving student success and many practical ideas on how to do it at various levels within an institution (http://www.che.ac.za/content/regional-symposia-student-success-19-23-august-2013). The events were widely publicised over a period of several months, admission was free and anyone from an HEI was allowed to register on a first-come first-served basis until the places were filled. Over 800 people from all universities in the country attended one of the symposia, including DVCs and other senior management members, deans, academics, student support and academic development staff. Vincent Tinto's focus on the possible, on what can be done and what works, rather than on the obstacles, generated a great deal of positive energy, a very good pre-cursor to implementing the QEP.

In September a fortuitous meeting was held with key senior staff from the national Department of Higher Education and Training at which there was a discussion about their draft policy on what institutions could access funding for from their national Teaching Development Grant and how it related to the QEP. After this meeting, they were able to make some adjustments to their proposed policy, including making references to the QEP, before they held a national workshop for all universities. As a result, one of the HEIs' concerns related to the feasbility of the QEP, namely how to fund QEP-related activities, was partially addressed (not completely, as the focus areas overlap significantly but are not identical).

After eight months of broad engagement within the higher education sector involving over 1000 people, in September and October the draft QEP framework was completely re-written. A companion document was also drafted that spelt out the process that would be followed in the QEP, including the detailed requirements for the institutional submissions. These documents were discussed by the CHE senior management, the IAC, the HEQC and members of the advisory group. The final QEP framework (CHE 2014a) and process documents (CHE

2014b) were approved by the CHE Council in December 2013 and published in February 2014.

Key features of the Quality Enhancement Project

This section provides a brief description of how the QEP will run. The QEP will follow a process that is inductive and iterative. It is inductive in that each step in the process will inform what happens in the next step. It is iterative in that there will be two phases. The process that will be followed in each phase of the QEP is represented in figure 1. It involves activities that are both institutionally-based (shown in red) and nationally-coordinated (shown in yellow), as well as spin-off activities (shown in green).

The first step in each phase is the selection of focus areas with which all institutions are asked to engage. Institutional submissions are then prepared, which provide baseline information on institutional activities and priorities in relation to the focus areas—how they relate to institutions' strategic plans, what institutions have tried that been successful and how they know, what has not been as successful as they had hoped, what they plan to do in the near future and what still needs to be addressed. Once the submissions have been received, the CHE will carry out a qualitative analysis to identify promising practices, common concerns and shared problems. The results of this analysis will be publically available. Based on the submissions, institutions will be clustered into collaborative groups for a two or three day workshop in which they will engage more deeply with the focus areas. The outputs from these workshops will also be analysed, synthesised and made public. By 30 November of the second year of a phase, institutions will submit a report on what progress they have made in relation to the focus areas since the phase began. New focus areas for the next phase will be selected by the CHE in consultation with appropriate role players. In the following year institutions will receive individual feedback on what they have done well and where they can improve. They will also work on institutional submissions for the new focus areas. While all of these activities are running, it is envisaged that numerous spin-off activities (shown in green in Figure 1) will take place. These include symposia organised by the CHE, HEIs or other organisations, working groups that could be established to look at particular issues, projects of other professional bodies, research projects and opportunities for capacity development in institutions.

Following the lead of the Scottish QAA, we have asked that DVCs academic or teaching and learning be the points of contact between institutions and the CHE and that they identify or establish a structure to coordinate QEP activities at their institutions. We have also requested that they form a national leadership group. In addition, we plan to hold two meetings per year of institutional QEP representatives at which issues close to the coal-face can be shared.

Select focus areas

Institutional submissions

Analysis

Feedback

Symposia, working groups

Collaboration

Projects of other bodies

Analysis

Research projects

Feedback

Institutional capacity development

Institutional reports
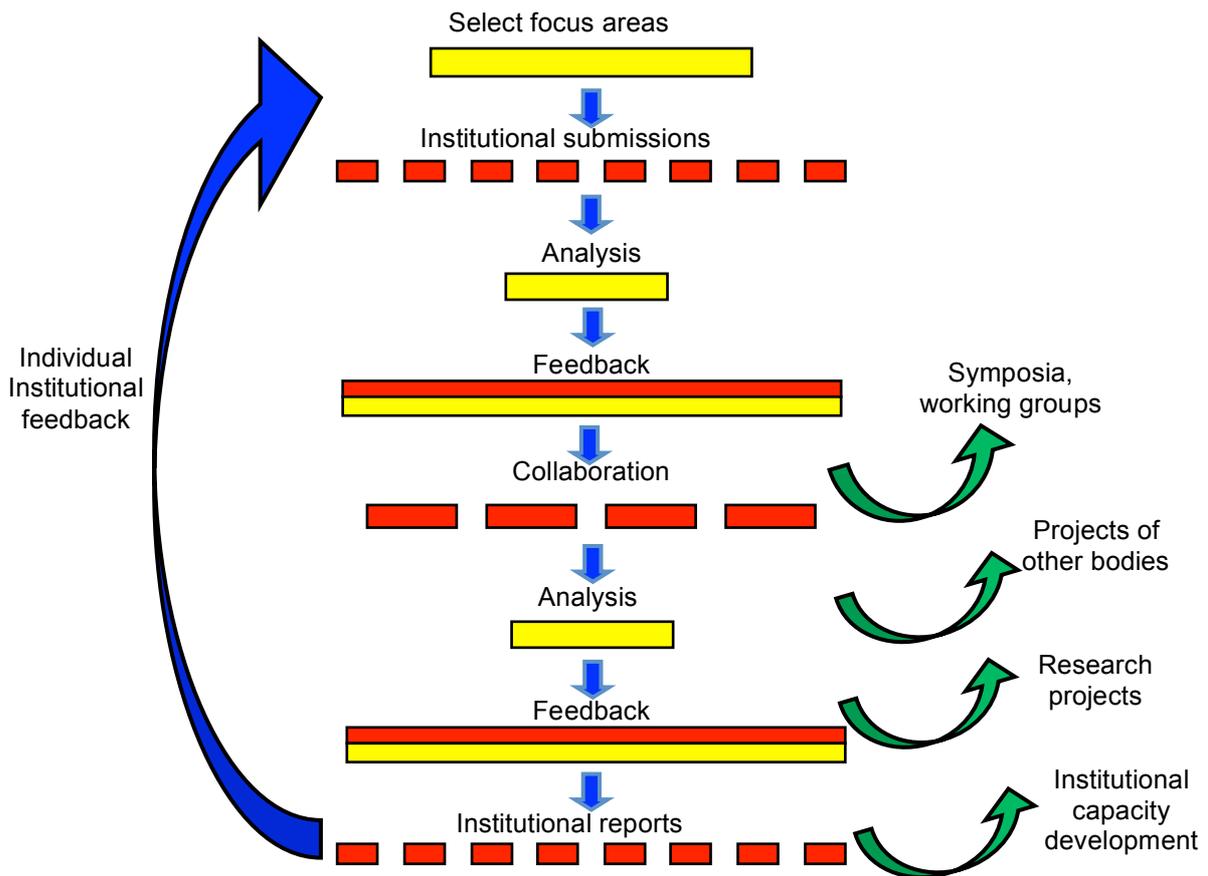
Individual Institutional feedback

Figure 1: Process for each phase of the QEP. Yellow blocks are institutionally-based activities and red blocks are nationally-coordinated activities.

Where we are now

In November 2013 a meeting was held with DVCs at which the penultimate version of the QEP framework and process documents were presented. The documents were enthusiastically received, and there was broad consensus that the DVCs' concerns from earlier in the year had been addressed. In particular, they now felt that the QEP was feasible and focused. They were requested to inform their institutions about the QEP and the planned activities, particularly the institutional submission requirements. The CEO of the CHE also sent a letter to the Vice-Chancellors of all universities in December, together with drafts of the framework and process documents.

As mentioned earlier, four focus areas were identified for Phase 1. These areas deal mainly with structural issues that may facilitate or constrain student success. It is likely that in Phase 2 the focus areas will deal more with issues related to the practices of those working directly with students. For phase 1 of the QEP the agreed focus areas are:

1. **Enhancing academics as teachers** This area includes opportunities and requirements for professional development of academics, rewards and recognition for teaching-related activities, how workloads are calculated and the extent to which the time needed for good-quality teaching and curriculum development are included, conditions of service and whether performance appraisal includes teaching proficiency.

2. **Enhancing student support and development** This area includes career and curriculum advising, the development of life skills and academic skills, the development of a number of literacies, including academic writing, IT and numeracy, counselling and monitoring of student performance linked to referral for support.

3. **Enhancing the learning environment** This area includes the nature, condition, accessibility and resourcing of teaching spaces and spaces for individual student and group learning, ICT provision, use of technology-enabled teaching and learning tools, resources and opportunities and library facilities.

4. **Enhancing course and programme management** This area includes the processes used for admissions, selection and placement of students into different programmes, how decisions are made about refusing readmission, pass rates in the courses that act as gateways because they are prerequisites for many students and other courses, throughput rates and management information systems.

A formal launch of the QEP was held in February 2014, to which universities were invited to send five representatives. Two guests from Scotland gave presentations at the launch, the Head of Enhancement at the Scottish QAA and the DVC for Learning and Teaching from a prestigious Scottish University. A meeting of DVCs was held immediately following the launch, which included the two Scottish visitors, who stressed the value of having a national leadership group of DVCs to help steer quality enhancement. It has now been agreed that such a leadership group will be created, with terms of reference to be discussed over the next few months.

The IAC, which is accountable to the HEQC, is taking on the role of monitoring the QEP. In addition, a working group has been created to identify qualitative and quantitive indicators for the QEP, both short and long-term. The CHE is collaborating with the South African Association for Institutional Research to enable HEIs to gather the evidence that will be needed.

Conclusion

The QEP is a systemic initiative designed to provide a mechanism for addressing a serious national problem, namely, poor student success in higher education in South Africa. In this paper, Kotter's 8-step process for leading change has been used as a framework to discuss the evolution and planned implementation of the Quality Enhancement Project.

Throughput rates, published around the time consultations on the QEP began, helped provide a **sense of urgency** for change.

The creation of a **guiding coalition** is in progress. Three meeting with DVCs academic and teaching and learning were held within a year. At the last meeting in February 2014 it was agreed that a national quality enhancement committee will be formed, which will provide a platform for very senior level peer reflection, deliberation and action on how to improve student success. The IAC and HEQC provide another kind of guidance in that they are responsible for monitoring and steering the QEP.

A **vision for change** has been developed. The regional symposia with Vincent Tinto, attended by over 800 people across the country and the higher education sector, created a groundswell of interest in improving student success. His presentations provided a much-needed infusion of fresh air and ideas into a system that has operated in a largely closed and highly regulated space in which both people and ideas are often recycled. And while he made no claims about the transferability of the work he has done in the USA to the South African context, it was not difficult for participants to see its relevance to our context, or use them as a springboard for locally-devised action.

The vision has been widely **communicated** and a reasonable level of buy-in has been achieved fairly quickly, aided by the highly participative nature of both the development and implementation of the QEP. During the year-long planning phase, hundreds of role players in various parts of the higher education sector were engaged, including people from different levels and structures within universities, government and professional bodies, as well as international experts. As more people become involved within their institutions and the various steps in the QEP process are implemented, hopefully the level of buy-in will increase.

Empowering broad-based action involves removing obstacles to change and encouraging non-traditional ideas and activities. This will take time. Much of it will depend upon what the leadership at institutions are willing to encourage, facilitate or tolerate. This, in turn, will be influenced by how the DVCs work as a group, and the extent to which the group's ideas can be implemented at institutional level. The national QEP representatives meetings will provide a forum for sharing and stimulating ideas. In addition, some broad-based action can be supported through national initiatives, such as government policy changes.

Because of the structure of the QEP, in which information is constantly gathered and disseminated, we envisage that it should be possible to **generate short-term wins**. The process of preparing submissions has provided institutions with an opportunity to cross the boundaries of their own institutional structures in order to source information and then reflect on their own processes, policies and activities. In doing so, areas for improvement are likely to become immediately apparent. When this information is analysed and synthesised nationally, strategies for improving student success in the short-term, as well as the longer term, should emerge.

The structure of the QEP, with its many steps, regular meetings of various role players and requirements for institutional reflection prior to submitting documentation should ensure that we do not **"let up"**, in Kotter's terms. There will be constant impetus to enhance student success.

After the QEP has been running for several years, we hope that a culture of quality enhancement will become embedded in institutions' thinking, strategies and practices, as has happened in Scotland. This would ensure that **changes are incorporated into the culture** of institutions.

Although Kotter refers to his eight steps in sequence, in the context of the QEP a number of the steps cannot be done only once, and some must done in parallel. At present, familiarity with the QEP, its goals and modus operandi, is limited within institutions. Depending on how DVCs have implemented the QEP at their individual institutions, it is likely that by now deans and directors will know about the QEP, but information may not have filtered through to Heads of Department, and probably not to individual academics and support staff. Thus there

will have to be multiple cycles of "communicating the vision for buy-in" and "empowering broad based action" during the QEP. The changes associated with "never letting up" and "incorporating changes into the culture" will need to take place over years, preferably for the foreseeable future.

It took just one year from the time the QEP was first presented to DVCs until it was formally launched. Given how different the QEP is from anything that has ever been done in South Africa before, as well as the large scale and broad scope of the project, this is astonishing. The speed with which this could be achieved was greatly aided by following a highly participative process in shaping the QEP and being cognisant of Kotter's change management framework. In the final QEP framework document, many, many people could hear their own voices, and there is a growing sense of ownership of the project by DVCs.

As a systemic intervention, it is anticipated that there will be a number of outcomes of the QEP that will have a positive impact on the higher education system. In broad terms, the desired outcomes of the QEP are:
1. Enhancement of the quality of undergraduate provision;
2. Enhancement of the quality of graduates;
3. A higher education system that is improving continuously as members of the higher education community collaborate to share good practice and solve shared problems.

More specific outcomes include: codes of good practice for quality undergraduate provision, policy recommendations, tools and resources for improving student success, research, communities of practice and coordinated national actions. These outcomes will raise the bar for what can be expected of institutions in promoting student success in future and help promote an environment that is more enabling of student success.

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