

**The limits of HEI websites as sources of learning and teaching information for prospective students: a survey of professional staff**

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## **Abstract**

The Green Paper *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS, 2015) suggests that the UK Higher Education (HE) landscape will be transformed, with greater emphasis on the quality of teaching and dissemination of high-quality learning and teaching (L&T) information to students. The latter is important for achieving the Government's widening participation agenda. Previously, a survey of the websites of 38 HE institutions found that limited information was provided to prospective students on several aspects of L&T (Hosein and Rao, 2015). This research study analyses interview data from quality assurance and marketing personnel in eight British universities to identify the reasons for this information gap on HE institutions websites. The findings indicate that both institutional and individual practices influence the quality of L&T website information. The recognition of these contributory factors may facilitate the provision of quality information and guidance on effective ways of addressing these.

**Keywords:** learning and teaching information; university websites; information quality in higher education; prospective students

## **Introduction**

Choosing the right Higher Education Institution (HEI) is a critical decision for Higher Education (HE) students globally because of the financial commitments involved particularly with rising HE fees (Browne, 2010). The Browne Review (Browne, 2010) on UK HE identified the need for HEIs to provide easy access to information to allow students to make value judgements about their 'investments' as ill-informed decisions

can impact on students' success, academic engagement and retention (Tinto, 2000; Krause et al., 2005; Harvey and Drew, 2006; Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2011, 2012; Andrews et al., 2012; Vossensteyn et al., 2015). This can lead to a negative impact on the academic reputation of the HEI and possibly leading to student dissatisfaction and increased attrition rates. It is critical, therefore, for HEI personnel to ensure that the product students are investing in matches their expectations in order to hopefully engender higher student satisfaction (Connor et al., 2001; Yorke and Thomas, 2003; Davies, 2012). Thus, the UK HE landscape is likely to change with greater emphasis on the dissemination of high-quality learning and teaching (L&T) information to current and prospective students (see BIS, 2015).

HEI websites are a key marketing and recruitment tool used by university personnel because websites are very influential. (McAllister-Spooner, 2008; Gordona and Berhow, 2009; Pampaloni, 2010; Schimmel et al., 2010). Nearly 95% of prospective students access HEI websites and prospectuses for information (Slack et al., 2014). In the UK, HEIs are already required to provide comparable information by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), called Key Information Sets (KIS) across similar undergraduate degree programmes (HEFCE, 2012). However, KIS provide limited L&T information. As this is a key area, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) produced and distributed guidance documents on the additional information that HEIs can provide about the L&T on their programmes (see QAA, 2013 a-d) via their websites, prospectuses, definitive programme documents and/or open days. The documents focused on providing information on staff teaching qualifications, class size, student workload and responding to students' feedback.

A survey of 38 UK HEI websites on the L&T information provision for prospective students based on these guidance documents found limited adherence (Hosein and Rao, 2015). The survey indicated that a consistently large amount of information on student workload and on methods of learning, teaching and assessment were commonly cited on university websites. However, only one-third of the 38 university websites, largely those with high National Student Survey (NSS) scores provided information on the expected contact time with tutors. Information, on the type of delivery methods such as seminars, lectures and laboratories, was found on a fifth of the institutions' websites surveyed. The study also brought to light that there was limited presence of staff teaching qualifications at course and staff profile level and it was completely missing at institutional level on the websites of the 38 surveyed HEIs.

This paper aims to explore the reasons for the lack of L&T information on HEI websites through analysis of interview responses provided by relevant HEI personnel. We anticipate that the identification of the reasons for the website information gap will help the HE sector to understand the core issues which hinder the provision of quality L&T information and consider implementing appropriate policies and practices to address these issues.

### **Research Design**

The data for the present study was drawn from interviews with quality assurance and marketing personnel from a selection of the 38 HEIs involved in Phase One (June 2015) of the QAA guidance document evaluation research by Hosein and Rao (2015) and forms Phase Two of the study. The HEIs were selected based on their size and student satisfaction rating. HEIs were grouped into Small ( $\leq 9500$ ), Medium (9501 to

15000) and Large (>15000) based on undergraduate student enrolments (as obtained from the 2013/14 Higher Education Statistical Agency, HESA, statistics). The 2014 NSS overall student satisfaction scores for Question 22 (*Overall I am satisfied with the quality of the course*) served as a criterion for determining students' satisfaction with their HEI. Using this criterion, the HEIs were divided into three categories – High (>88%), Intermediate (>84% to 88%) and Low Satisfaction ( $\leq 84\%$ ) (for further details on the process of selection, see Hosein and Rao, 2015).

Interviews with HEI personnel were conducted in September/October 2015 by the researchers themselves to explore the factors that influenced the provision of L&T information on the websites of their HEI. Quality assurance or management personnel from 30 of the 38 universities in Phase One were contacted as the contact information for personnel in 6 HEIs could not be ascertained; the other two were excluded as they were part of the pilot study. Only 8 personnel from the remaining 30 universities agreed to participate in the interviews. Nine did not respond at all, seven did not respond after making initial enquiries, four declined to participate as they wanted to concentrate on responding to the requirements of the Competitions and Marketing Authority (CMA) regulatory body which they needed to meet by October 2015 and two declined to participate without providing a reason.

The interviewees participated in a recorded Skype-to-telephone interview (audio only), which lasted for about thirty minutes each. Prior to the semi-structured interviews, the interviewees were sent the findings of the survey for their institution, the participation information sheet along with a link to the four QAA guidance documents. The information sheet and the invitation email detailed what the interview will focus on, namely on their institution's practice of providing data on the websites and the challenges they face in implementing their practice. The interviewees were

not given any specific guidance in what capacity they should answer and hence their responses included references to both their personal (individual) and institutional practices. In four institutions after sharing the information sheet, we were directed to other personnel who were considered more suitable for the interview. Four of the eight interviewees were quality assurance personnel (Interviewees 3, 4, 7 and 8) and the rest were engaged in various roles related to marketing, L&T, student engagement and admissions (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Distribution of interviewees based on size and student satisfaction of the HEI**

*(Table 1 about here)*

The interview questions focused on identifying their familiarity with the QAA guidance documents, the extent and consistency of its institutional implementation, issues in adherence to the QAA guidelines on L&T information provision and how their institutions were preparing for the upcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF, to be introduced in 2016) and CMA guidelines (compliance by October 2015). The anonymised audio recordings of the interviews were sent for professional transcription.

The eight interview transcripts (the dataset) were analysed using an exploratory inductive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013). For data familiarisation, the researchers undertook a systematic examination of the textual data of the interview transcripts to ensure detailed attention was given to each data item. Meaning and patterns in the data items were actively sought during this phase, which helped to identify codes; these were supported by illustrative interview extracts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All the codes and their related interview extracts were collated and tabulated in an MS-Excel spreadsheet. This initial analysis

generated different codes, which were grouped into potential emergent themes. Therefore, the analytic codes and subsequent themes were content-driven and not pre-determined.

## **Analyses**

The interview data revealed that factors which influenced the quality of website L&T information were ‘individual/personal’ related to the individual’s own approach and/or were ‘institutional’, influenced by the concerned HEI’s approach to information provision. For the purpose of this study, the institutional factors were identified as factors linked to the individual HEI’s policies and practices which influenced the quality of L&T information on their websites. These may have arisen as a direct consequence of any problematic issues in administration, governance and/or logistics. The individual factors included those which may be a consequence of the interviewee’s own standpoint, orientation and perspectives on the type of website information that should be made available to the prospective students.

The following sections elaborate on these individual and institutional factors and the discussion is supported by direct quotes from the interviewees. It is of note that there is a higher representation of quotes from some interviewees (Interviewee 2 and 3) as they were more forthcoming in sharing their views, whilst others appeared to be more reluctant and reserved in sharing their opinions. This could possibly be because Interviewees 2 and 3 were representing universities that registered a higher student satisfaction and therefore might have been more confident to talk about their practices. Those reluctant might have been new to their job and therefore more uncertain of the practices.

### ***Organisational decision-making for knowledge sharing***

There appeared to be a lack of knowledge sharing and decision-making about information within HEIs that impacted on dissemination of L&T information on the websites. For example, half the interviewees (Interviewees 2, 6, 7 and 8) indicated an awareness of the existence of the professional body (QAA) guidance documents. Of those who were aware, only two interviewees had read them (Interviewees 2 and 8) prior to us requesting an interview. Those who had not read the QAA document either claimed to be unaware of their existence (Interviewees 1 and 5) and suggested that the information was not disseminated to them or some expressed their inability to adopt the recommendations of these documents as they were new to their job (Interviewees 3 and 4).

Interestingly, the two personnel who expressed no knowledge of the documents, as they perceived themselves to be new to their job, had been working in their positions for more than 18 months. Their responses suggested some element of organisational failure, in that the handing over of the job may not have been done competently:

*'...I think it's fair to say that I hadn't seen them before. I should clarify that I'm relatively new in this subject area. I started in my current role a year and a half ago, ...'*

- Interviewee 3

*'...because I've only been in this post for the last 20 months, so that might be part of it. Somebody involved, my predecessor, was not very good at disseminating information, because I'd asked other people in the department.'*

- Interviewee 4

In some cases, the personnel were aware of the QAA guidance documents but expressed ambiguity in relation to the significance of these documents (supplementary versus mandatory) in making decisions on the website content or were uncertain as to who was responsible for the decision making:

*'...I was aware of them, but I confess that I hadn't looked at them in any detail..., I don't spend too much time on the nitty-gritty, but it was the overarching quality document – I can't recall its title in truth – that we've been looking at, in particular. These are supplementary to that, aren't they?'*

- Interviewee 2

*'... that wouldn't be my role. I certainly would expect that someone here would be looking at that, but that wouldn't be my role. I am one of several Quality Managers in Academic Services but that wouldn't be my role. It would be more the role of probably The Registrar's Office.'*

- Interviewee 7

### ***Information governance***

In some cases, the interviewees commented that there was ambiguity or ineffectiveness in the information governance processes, at both the information acquisition and the dissemination stages. In some institutions, the information was acquired and implemented centrally at an institutional level; in others, the information was managed more peripherally within the departments/programmes. This 'devolved information governance', where the individual programme leaders/departmental heads were responsible for information provision, allowed flexibility for programmes/departments to tailor the information as appropriate for their prospective students. However, it also lent itself to institutional inconsistencies in information

provision across various programmes. Further, this also led to communication gaps between the key stakeholders – those responsible for providing the website content for the programmes and those responsible for marketing them. Duplication of information due to devolved structures was another limitation.

Interviewee 6 was of the view that the lack of consistency in providing information was a consequence of the difference in the level of information provided by course teams:

*‘... in the sense that there are some very engaged course leaders who constantly update their information, and are really assiduous about that, and actually challenge perhaps the marketing approach because they want more teaching and learning information on there ...’*

- Interviewee 6

Concurring with this view, Interviewee 8 conceded the need for a more professional services approach to be introduced to provide institutional consistency of information provision:

*‘ We’re in the process of moving to a unified professional services approach, .... We think that will probably find a more institutional consistency, where some of the variations were beyond [what] you might have anticipated being driven by it being [for example] Maths or Philosophy, because they developed their own cultures of the way they presented it.’*

- Interviewee 8

### ***Professional judgement***

Our findings indicated that professional judgement appeared to be one of the major determinants in prioritisation of the kind of website information which was

considered appropriate for prospective students:

*‘ ... we kind of have to use our professional judgement as to at what stage in the student journey – potential student, current student – at what stage in that journey is appropriate to give them different levels of information?’*

- Interviewee 2

The focus appeared to be more on providing general information to prospective students rather than in-depth L&T information to reflect what they would encounter when they are enrolled on the programme. Interviewee 2, particularly, felt that aspects such as the content of the course, teaching quality and specialist and general facilities available in the HEI were of special interest to prospective students. Further, interviewee 3 added:

*‘ The things that I think we think are particularly important for students are understanding the subject matter of the course, financial information, both about fees and costs. We've done a lot of work over the last few years to try and be clear about additional course costs and in explaining how the particular teaching methodology at my institution ... ’*

- Interviewee 3

Three of the interviewees mentioned a more strategic approach to website information provision, with a tendency to prioritise information which highlighted the strengths of their HEI, e.g. good NSS scores, reputable staff members etc., rather than providing a more holistic approach to information provision which might be of particular relevance to the prospective students:

*'It's really providing what is the most positive view of the course, so something about the structure, inevitably something about the entry requirements, a lot about the support available to students, and some showcasing of our particularly good members of staff.'*

- Interviewee 6

It appeared that the professional judgement of the HEI personnel was often informed by their personal inclinations and they displayed a paternalistic attitude where they understood best the information needs of the students.

***Responsiveness to professional bodies and governmental guidance documentation***

Many interviewees expressed the need to prioritise the information which required compliance by external regulatory bodies such as the HEFCE and CMA, rather than the recommended guidelines provided by the QAA. The need 'to get the "correct" message over to prospective clients' (Tomlinson, 2013, 126) and the increased accountability to external regulatory bodies may lead to personnel adopting a cautious approach. Thus, the repercussions of sanctions by regulatory bodies such as the CMA for providing inaccurate information to prospective students may encourage HEIs to provide limited and generic information to prospective students to be compliant:

*'The issue of the guidance from the CMA has been taken very seriously here and is leading to quite a lot of work about exactly what we present to prospective students.'*

- Interviewee 3

Interviewees were wary of giving a ‘hostage to fortune’ by providing specific and accurate information on aspects of L&T that might be transient, for example, staff-student ratios, which may fluctuate with student recruitment numbers. The difficulty in ensuring the accuracy of website information would lead to issues with information compliance as expected by CMA. Hence, HEIs may exercise a cautious approach to information dissemination to comply with external regulatory bodies (e.g. CMA, HEFCE):

*‘ ... It has led to reluctance to provide too much specific information for the fear of being inaccurate. It is difficult to give specific information, because there is a balance to be had, isn’t there? Between giving students enough information to make them think, but then making absolutely sure that we give them up-to-date information at the time of making them an offer. ‘*

- Interviewee 2

Further, maintaining the currency of information poses a challenge to institutions. This is due to the instability of the information as institutions have to keep pace with the changes. As the change has to be implemented institution-wide, there may also be difficulties in procuring and disseminating such information:

*‘Programmes are not static so the information changes and sometimes it is difficult to keep up- to-date the website immediately after programme approval etc.’*

- Interviewee 4

*‘The concern is, if we’re too specific, whether that is going to provide a hostage to fortune... Then, as I say, it’s just the nervousness around that.’*

- Interviewee 5

Six out of the eight interviewees acknowledged that the proposed TEF was likely to have an impact on website information. They suggested the TEF would enhance the need for greater transparency of information and the need for more sophisticated tools for helping students access the data which is more relevant to their interests and contexts:

*'Yes it [TEF] will have an impact. Any idea that also that [TEF] might be linked to funding has obviously got everybody on their toes.'*

- Interviewee 7

*'I think that both the Teaching Excellence Framework and the new approach to Quality Assurance that HEFCE is consulting on together will see a greater degree of transparency.'*

- Interviewee 8

## **Discussion**

In the preceding sections, we have explored a plethora of institutional and individual approaches that influence the provision of quality L&T information. We considered the impact of issues in organisational information sharing and of the indifference or lack of awareness of the QAA documents. The interviewees appeared to have responded differently to the demands of the professional bodies on the information that should be included on the HEI websites. Whilst they were more compliant towards providing the 'mandatory' information for HEFCE-instituted KIS data, their responsiveness to the 'advisory' QAA documents appeared to be limited. We illustrate here an example of how the various factors had an impact on one of the

aspects of L&T information provided by university websites – the teaching qualification of academics, which the QAA guidance suggests that universities should actively seek to provide on their websites.

Students often rate academics with teaching qualifications favourably (Nasr et al., 1996; Gibbs and Coffey, 2004; HEPI 2015). However, according to Hosein and Rao (2015), this information had a limited presence at the course and staff profile level, and it was completely missing at institutional level on the websites of the 38 surveyed HEIs. In this current study, the personnel interviewed accepted that there were difficulties in providing this information due to problems related to accessibility of information (information governance). This could be due to its location on the institutional websites, where it seemed to be placed more prominently on staff profiles rather than programme or course level (information governance). Staff turnover would also preclude universities from giving specific information on staff as it could be misleading should there be subsequent staff changes (cautious approach due to CMA). Further, resistance from senior members of staff in providing this information may lead to difficulties in collating such data (professional judgement). Moreover, the universities continue to lay more emphasis on disseminating information on staff research and consider aspects such as the Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) teaching accreditation as a low institutional priority (professional judgement):

*"Particularly the question of staff teaching qualifications we have not focused on because it's not an issue that we think is particularly interesting to our potential students. What we're trying to explain about what our provision is, is much more around the way that our staff teach and the links that are made between teaching and research activity. We don't take a- what's the right word*

*for it? We're keen for our staff to undertake teaching qualifications where they want to, but it's not something that we're pursuing with a radical agenda. "*

- Interviewee 3

Unlike the current practice, where there is limited information on teaching qualifications on websites (Hosein and Rao, 2015), Interviewee 4 suggested that there would be a greater emphasis on providing teaching qualifications following TEF. However, Interviewees 3 and 6 were unsure of the impact due to lack of clarity on TEF. Interviewee 3 was of the opinion that the impact was likely to be more institutional rather than at subject level:

*'... the first exercise will be at institutional level rather than at subject level; that may mean that there's only limited impact in terms of the information we're presenting at subject level. It's very difficult to know because of the lack of clarity ...'*

- Interviewee 3

Overall, the thematic analysis of the interviews with the eight interview participants has shown that there is a complex interplay of a multitude of factors, both individual and institutional, that may in part explain the paucity of L&T information on HEI websites.

## **Conclusion**

The quality of the 'pre-purchase' L&T information on HEI websites plays a crucial role in helping prospective students in making an informed choice. However, our findings suggest that many HEIs adopt a procedural and formulaic approach to information provision. The limited website L&T information appeared to be a

consequence of various issues raised by institutional and individual practices to information provision.

The interviews revealed that there were gaps in communication processes for knowledge sharing and knowing the personnel responsible for making key decisions about L&T information on websites. The devolved structure of information governance in some universities provided a flexible framework but also became a potential source of information gaps. The findings suggest that an effective and clearly defined information governance process may help alleviate some of these issues.

Perceptions of those interviewed revealed that there was existence of an 'attitudinal paternalism', where the personnel often used their professional judgement and personal inclinations to decide the quality and quantity of information that they considered best for prospective students. Furthermore, most personnel appeared to demonstrate a cautious approach to information dissemination to comply with external regulatory bodies. This audit culture may have created an 'economy of performance' (Stronach et al., 2002), where the external regulatory bodies appear as one of the major inhibitory factors in providing desired L&T information. The regulatory bodies appeared to have created a dialectic situation for professionals in terms of what information they wanted to provide and the information they were obliged to make available. Interviewees were also wary of giving a 'hostage to fortune' by providing specific and accurate information on aspects of L&T that might be transient, for example, staff-student ratio, which may fluctuate with student recruitment numbers. Therefore, the discursive practice created due to the obligations placed by the regulatory bodies appeared to reinforce among HEI personnel a

tendency towards ‘minimal adherence’ only implementing guidance which was obligatory rather than advisory (such as the QAA guidance documents).

Our sample size does not permit unequivocal conclusions. It would have been interesting to draw conclusions on how the responses of the interviewees varied with size and satisfaction coding of the HEIs. However, considering the small size of our sample it would be difficult to draw any meaningful inferences on the basis of single interviews as to how the size and the satisfaction rating of the HEIs had an impact. Moreover, the sample was not representative as we could not recruit participants from HEIs with high satisfaction and medium size and HEIs with intermediate satisfaction and small size.

Nonetheless, our in-depth interviews do provide an illuminating perspective on what limits the provision of detailed and accurate L&T information to prospective students. We also believe that they highlight the changing nature of professional practice within the HEI, which appears to be driven by the values of consumerism where ‘the student-HEI relationship is clearly defined in legal terms’ (Palfreyman 2013, 109). In the current HE climate, our study reveals that there is a tendency amongst the personnel responsible for information provision to prioritise obligatory information to achieve compliance with external regulatory bodies due to the fear of punitive consequences. We contend that the identification of the factors that influence the provision of quality L&T information is important in light of the impending TEF. Our findings may facilitate HEIs and external agencies to recognise some of the challenges faced by HEI personnel in providing quality L&T information on HEI websites and take appropriate measures to address them.

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**Table 1. Distribution of interviewees based on size and student satisfaction of the HEI and area of work/ responsibility**

<b>Student Satisfaction/ Size</b>	<b>High (H)</b>	<b>Intermediate (I)</b>	<b>Low (Lo)</b>
<b>Large (L)</b>	Interviewees 3 (Quality Assurance)* Interviewee 8 (Student Engagement)	Interviewee 7 (Quality Assurance)	Interviewee 5 (Learning and Teaching)
<b>Medium (M)</b>	-	Interviewee 1 (Admissions)	Interviewee 4 (Quality Assurance)
<b>Small (S)</b>	Interviewee 2 (Marketing)	-	Interviewee 6 (Quality Assurance)

\* Area of work/responsibility in brackets