

## ***The Myth of the Quality Project in Higher Education***

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### **Abstract**

In the 'quality project' in the UK's HE sector over the last 20 years, there is tension between processes by which quality of service is enhanced and processes which assure quality of service. This paper considers whether the HE teaching quality framework delivers both assurance and enhancement. It considers whether the processes of assurance may interfere with the enhancement of quality in HE and concludes that the 'quality project' is, itself, inauditable.

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### **1 The Quality of Learning, Teaching and Research in Universities**

Concern with quality has become central in contemporary managerial practice and through inclusion of higher education in the evaluative state and the New Public Management (NPM) (Barnett, 1992; 2003: p 91). 'Quality' is an enduring puzzle, since consumers' experience of activities' value – benefits and costs – is subjective, complex and shifting. The same activity is experienced differently by consumers in differing circumstances, times and life stages; quality in consumption also varies according to experiences of other activities and services consumed. Furthermore, experience of the value of any organisation's impact extends beyond the immediate purchaser as consumer: embracing others affected by the activity, by the activity's opportunity costs and by contingent activities made possible or closed down.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, counting activity imperfectly reflects its value: one must consider value in other dimensions. Higher education raises particular difficulties in considering quality. First, activity creates intermediate services, whose 'value' derives from individuals' – and arguably society's – changed capacity to experience value in future activities and to develop value from past memories. Such implications are unforeseen and unpredictable, implying market failure. This raises issues not only of ideal quantities of education within societies, but also value-laden problems of education's quality. Second, (higher) education interacts with many variables in delivering its effects upon the individual and indirectly upon society. As a result, no single prescription of quality can span all higher education activity, giving rise to the immense area of quality debates in fitness-for-purpose. Third, the attenuation of markets in higher education deprives us of the classic means of reconciling complex values, that of value-in-exchange. Without market pricing, values and quality remain obscure even at one point of time, while the passage of time introduces changes in the composition of quality, bedevilling discussions of direction in outcome quality.

Any discussion of quality thus must be multi-dimensional and it is in that context that this discussion proceeds. The paper confines itself to teaching quality issues, to keep within bounds of space. The next section considers conceptualisation of quality, isolating the key management distinction between the measurement or assessment of quality and the management or enhancement of it. It considers what is meant by the contemporary concerns with 'audit' of quality and how audit interacts with the nature and management of what is audited. The answer to the question posed in this paper lies in this key distinction and informs the debate over management of quality in modern universities. In section 3, we draw lessons from experience of quality assurance processes in the UK and elsewhere. Section 4 introduces discussion of quality enhancement, before the paper concludes with a clarification of the essential distinction between assurance and enhancement and management issues arising from it.

## **2 Measurement and Audit of Quality**

The quality of service delivered in universities should first be defined. While the scale of activity in teaching might be counted by the episodes of completed courses, programmes, or degrees, or in research by the output of published new knowledge, such counts are without meaning unless there is agreement on the nature and characteristics of universities' outputs. The notion of quality addresses the value and characteristics that outputs convey: it attempts to make the connection between activity and outcome (see, for example, Brennan et al., 1997). Quality can thus be interpreted as the quality 'process' at least as easily as the quality 'outcome', making it more difficult to define. Brennan and Shah (2000), for example, manage a complete text on quality management without actually defining 'quality'; Goodlad suggests that 'the provision of quality assurance documentation has not been very illuminating about what quality actually is' (Goodlad, 1995: p 9); Becket and Brookes conclude that 'there is as yet no definitive model to evaluate quality within higher education' (Becket and Brookes, 2005: p4). Summarising a Forum debate on quality assurance and standards in Europe's HE sector, Harvey manages to make it 'slightly [sic] more complicated' with a five by four matrix of the interrelationship between quality and standards: the ENQA system sits in 1 of the 20 cells (Harvey, 2008: p80).

Barnett concludes that quality is an ideology rather than a concept; ubiquitous in 'its tendency to colonize all before it' (Barnett, 2003: p93).

To consider quality, therefore, one must consider output in light of both purpose and objectives – 'fit-for-purpose' – and also the degree to which outputs deliver the aspirations and expectations of the client or consumer. For example, an institution might aim to educate the school-leaver cohort to 1<sup>st</sup> degree level in vocational programmes: in considering quality, one would not then be concerned by the institution's output of learned research papers. However, the quality delivered would vary greatly according to whether graduates attracted offers of graduate-entry jobs, or whether their studies commenced from four A-level grade As or two grade Es, among many possible dimensions of 'quality' of the degrees awarded.

Quality of outcomes is thus inherently contextual and therefore slippery: one knows what is meant, but unambiguously recognising its presence is complex. Guides and standards of outcomes may appear to help, but measurement of quality attainment remains elusive. In particular, generating transparency of quality attained is difficult: not only lacking unambiguous standards of quality of outcomes usable in all contexts, but remaining confined within fit-for-purpose restrictions. Universities also face the issue of what constituency – client, consumer – is the target of transparency of quality of outcome. In some university activities, impacts and their quality may be experienced only by later generations, as with particle physics, or the discovery of DNA; in others, degree recipients will experience quality only through their lifetime, not at the point of participation. Further, quality of outcomes will be diffused through society, in the actions of educated graduates, the enhanced performance of short-course alumni, or the future research productivity of doctoral students.

Four consequences can be observed in the evolution of the quality project in universities. First, attention to quality assessment has rapidly ebbed away, having produced assessment results of dubious rationale and little value. Second, the project has relied increasingly on the default procedures of 'peer review', where participants in the system are the arbiters of whether competitors' activities are associated with quality of outcomes. This has marked standards setting and the assessment of teaching quality in benchmarking and TQA exercises, as it has also

with the assessment of quality of research outcomes in successive research assessment exercises (Brown, 1999; Gross, 2004).

Third, increasing attention is paid to processes of quality management, in enhancement, assurance and accountability. Indeed, without clear separation of these three strands of quality management the contemporary project becomes incomprehensible (Middlehurst, 1997; and section 3 below). The project has proliferated and become multi-faceted in an attempt to satisfy ideological needs for 'management' of indefinable quality. Fourth and finally, universities have found legitimacy in their 'management' of quality by the involvement of audit in their quality processes.

The phenomenon of audit forms a critical feature of the quality project over the last twenty years. As Power cogently suggests, the practice of auditing has been deployed by NPM as a key lever in supplanting traditional collegial or consensual styles of the management and control of public bodies by a culture of measurement and of routines and disciplines of accountability (Power, 1997; Hood, 1995). The independence and objectivity afforded by the audit concept empowers managers to reconceptualise organisations with obscure goals and fuzzy, complex accountability into leaner, focussed entities performing to targets and accountable to stakeholders. As with the concept of quality itself, audit is elevated to doctrinal truth: a guarantor of probity, of the performance of oversight and governance and of the concrete nature of progress by management.

The central role of audit in NPM is powerfully established by Dill (1998) and Neave (1998). Dill coins the phrase 'the evaluative state' to encapsulate the connection between the framing of performance in objective measurement and the legitimisation of performance management by audit. Audit is extended from the assurance of probity and faithfulness in companies' financial accounts of themselves to a host of other arenas of performance assurance: in 'environmental audit, value for money audit, management audit, forensic audit, data audit, intellectual property audit, medical audit', an 'audit explosion' (Power, 1997: p3). In UK universities, long considered 'public' institutions rather than private organisations by government, the apparatus of NPM has been enthusiastically embraced by funding councils as a

route to greater accountability and as a spur to efficiency and, hopefully, effectiveness (Dill, 1997; Cullen et al., 2003).

As Power argued most cogently, however, audit can be corrosive of quality as well as a mechanism for assurance of it. He discusses interaction of monitoring of the organisation through audit with the relational and implicit contracts between stakeholders and organisations: "Making quality auditable" is therefore a form of impression management .. Without audit and the certification that follows from audit, quality remains too private an affair' (Power, 1997: p60). Audit is one, but only one, component of the multi-stranded basis for trust and accountability (an issue accentuated further by O'Neill, 2002 and Strathern, 2000). The contemporary dominance of auditing carries with it the logic of accounting and auditing: in order to audit activity – and quality of activity – there must be readily available metrics that can be subjected to independent oversight. Such metrics must be influenced and changed by the operators of the organisation, but crucially they should be free from manipulation by those operators. Thus quality assurance is gained by management of the activities that then provoke change in the metrics, not by management of the metrics.

### **3 Quality Assurance in Action**

In this and the following section we consider the separation of quality assurance and quality enhancement highlighted by Middlehurst. This separation was represented in the UK practice between 1990 and 1997, when the structures of accountability of *Quality Audit* and *Quality Assessment* were operated independently (see HEQC, 1996; Brown, 2004).

'Quality assurance is concerned with establishing that objectives are being achieved consistently and reliably' (Middlehurst, 1997: p48). Thus the activity requires that, first, 'objectives' can be stated, that outcomes can be compared to objectives and that the extent to which universities meet their objectives can be communicated objectively and commensurately through time. A simple prescription has turned out to involve major reengineering of higher education activity and bodies of oversight, from the involvement of external examiners (high-status peer group members) in

universities' awards of qualifications to a panoply of oversight bodies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the umbrella Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). The QAA lists several major strands of its own activity: Institutional Audit, Developmental Engagements, Academic Review of Subjects, and Major Review of Healthcare Programmes (QAA, 2003: p4). Scotland presently has a separate mechanism, Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR), an example sustaining linkage of assurance and enhancement. In England and Wales, however, separation of function in quality oversight is explicit (HEFCE, 2003).

The interaction of auditability and the contemporary model for quality assurance are clear in the UK model. The QAA rests its activities on the publication of qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and codes of practice. Audit rests upon universities' capacity to demonstrate adoption of the QAA's methodology and in their provision of evidence that loops in reviewing and fostering quality enhancement provided by codes of practice have been operated (QAA, 2003: pp11-12). Brennan suggests this is consistent with the generic moves towards accountability and auditability in the UK system (Brennan, 2001: pp134-135), contrasted with managerial-centred approaches in Western Europe and state-centred assurance in Central and Eastern Europe. Van Vught also analyses positions across Europe in similar vein, suggesting that the codification and auditing of 'quality' conflicts with the ideals of the Humboldtian university (van Vught, 1996; also Haug, 2003; Mora, 2003). Quality assurance in Europe is increasingly harmonised in the ENQA framework (see, for example, the papers in EUA (2008), or the analysis for Portugal in ENQA (2006). The dominance of measurement and assurance in quality management in the US is exemplified in Welsh and Dey's work on quality measurement systems (QMS2000) in US HEIs (Welsh and Dey, 2002).

A key dimension of quality assurance, then, is its place in (re)positioning the university within the web of power relationships: between state, market, faculty and management. The quality project in the UK, faithful to the NPM, seeks to provide more transparency to the market such that universities are more readily susceptible to its discipline. Elsewhere, as in the pre-1990s UK, quality assurance may still be seen as adding strength to non-market foci of power (see again Brennan and Shah, 2000: pp 32-33; Brown, 2004).

#### **4 Quality Enhancement and the Role of Audit and Assurance**

Whether or not one can measure quality, the purpose of quality management can be agreed to be that of enhancing the quality of universities' services to their communities. 'Quality enhancement is concerned with improving on or changing the original objectives, aims or purposes' (Middlehurst, 1997: p48). This dimension of quality management is intimately connected to the literatures on transformation or change through management; and in particular to the Total Quality Management movement (see, for example, in the higher education context, Lewis and Smith, 1994). Increasingly, quality enhancement is seen as an issue of leadership and motivation, not primarily one of assessment and formalisation of process. The ELIR project operated by QAA Scotland explicitly recognises the slippery and processual nature of quality enhancement in a learning organisation, with little place for measurement and priority for review and engagement (QAA, 2007). Middlehurst, again, analyses the issues very cogently. She differentiates closely between improvement and accountability:

'The first flaw is that there is a necessary relationship between accountability and improvement: this is not the case, since they may each serve a range of different purposes and interests, .. in conflict with each other.

'A second flaw is based on the assumption that the motivations which drive individuals and institutions to be 'accountable' .. are the same as those which drive improvements in practice.' (ibid: pp 51-53)

Middlehurst concludes that 'In many cases, quality enhancement is only associated with the outcomes of quality control .. [such] incrementalism is an insufficient and possibly dangerous response' (ibid: p54). This mirrors the boundaries of management by measurement: managers are motivated and rewarded by performance to measures, rather than by the transcendence of convention; they adopt the goal of the measure, rather than what is being measured; and they will tend to prioritise what is readily accountable, rather than issues that are central to enhancement.

This is also the burden of others' analysis of the linkage between assurance (/audit) and enhancement of quality. Shore and Wright (2000) and Wright (2003) argue closely in support of O'Neill's (2002) thesis that quality assurance and audit has a corrosive effect on the professionalism that underpins effective leadership and quality management in the complex, higher education environment: 'new models of quality assurance that have been introduced into universities, as in many other areas of public life, have prescribed the work and performance of professionals and institutions, required conformity to frequent demands to record and report, set targets for work to be judged against performance indicators, and subjected professionals to regular rankings and restructuring. [O'Neill] argues that, in contrast to their ostensible, publicly celebrated aims of public accountability, the real aim of this 'Herculean micro-management' is centralised government control of professional organisations' (Wright, 2003: p1). Gore et al (2000) suggest that there are two contrasting paradigms in quality enhancement: the 'technical-rational' and the 'professional artistry' approaches. NPM and its focus on measured objectives, assurance through audit and discipline through transparency to the market weakens the place of the latter without attending to whether it may be superior in delivering enhancement. Conceptually, the two are rival, not comparable. One is 'risk-averse, sets routines and procedures.. Its values are of ensuring the successful progress through identified stages even if that means covering up weaknesses. Its heroes are those individuals who emphasise correct documentation .. This approach meshes nicely with an evolving managerial culture based on technical-rational perspectives'. The other 'recognises value in working with complexity .. adopts a holistic rather than reductionist approach .. Its heroes are the innovators .. Its attitudes are ones of co-operation and collaboration' (Gore et al., 2000: p 83)

The quality project also provides an example of a burgeoning 'management fad'. Birnbaum's stringent critique of universities' embrace of Total Quality Management finds that 'the disconnect between the philosophy of the management process and the purposes of the institution .. became more evident' (Birnbaum, 2001: p 107). It suggests special pleading, on the other hand, to argue that universities should be exempt from the impact and spread of NPM: that somehow academics are more special, insightful leaders of quality enhancement than others. Assurance and enhancement of quality are symbiotic, in that by measuring and assessing levels of

quality attained within a system giving assurance of attention to quality, it is likely that organisations will be externally disciplined – by state or markets – to compete by enhancing quality. The puzzle lies rather in whether the system of assurance – the ‘technical-rational paradigm’ above – reinforces or weakens the innovative leadership of quality by academics and university managers. Quality assurance should not be considered as leading the circle of virtuous improvement of quality: as Middlehurst reminds us, that is the locus of academic and institutional leadership (Middlehurst, 1997).

The caution is that quality assurance mechanisms and the audit culture associated with NPM do not unduly weaken the historic strengths of collegiality (Massy et al., 1994). One must go further, of course, in asking whether there was any existing ‘quality problem’ for the UK higher education sector, prior to this state-sponsored quality project. Sadly, given the slipperiness of the terms, the absence of precursor ‘measures’, satisfaction surveys and the changing nature of the systems themselves, the ‘quality project’ is itself inherently inauditable: perhaps, again, one feature of quality as an ideology, rather than as an operational concept of management.

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