

7. CONCLUSIONS

Quality culture, quality assurance and impact

Overview of discussions

Lee Harvey¹

The following is a synthesis of the outcomes of the eight open discussion groups at the forum, and the subsequent plenary, that addressed questions about the nature of quality culture, the link between a quality culture and internal and external quality assurance processes, and the impact of quality processes on teaching, learning and research.

Quality culture

Although there was much discussion around quality culture, there were few attempts in the discussion sessions or the forum as a whole to define quality culture. However, there was considerable exploration of the characteristics of a quality culture.

The following features emerged as indicative of a quality culture:

- ⌘ There is academic ownership of quality.
- ⌘ There is a recognition by academics and administrators of need for a system of quality monitoring to ensure accountability (and compliance where required) and to facilitate improvement. However, this should not be a 'bureaucratic' system.
- ⌘ Quality culture is primarily about the behaviour of stakeholders rather than the operation of a quality system.
- ⌘ The quality system needs to have a clear purpose, which articulates with the quality culture.
- ⌘ A quality culture places students at the centre.
- ⌘ A quality culture is about partnership and co-operation, sharing of experiences and team working.
- ⌘ A quality culture is about supporting the individual as an autonomous scholar but not at the expense of the learning community; there is a symbiotic relationship between individual and community.
- ⌘ Leadership in a quality culture is inspirational rather than dictatorial. Leadership is at all levels in the institution and does not refer to just senior managers.
- ⌘ A quality culture welcomes external critical evaluation from a variety of sources including formal external evaluations, external peers acting as critical friends, and internal peer review and support.
- ⌘ At heart a quality culture is about facilitating and encouraging reflexivity and praxis; self-reflection, developing improvement initiatives and implementing them.

There was a debate about whether a quality assurance system (internal and/or external) is a prerequisite for the development of a quality culture within an institution or department or whether it operates the other way round. Does an institution need to have developed a quality culture prior to (effective) implementation of a process of quality assurance? There was no clear answer to this and it seems most agree that the culture and the system need to grow together in harmony.

¹ Lee Harvey, Director of Centre for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom.

Benefits of a quality culture

The benefits of a quality culture are that it increases co-operation, gives students a voice that is heard, provides a strong front for an institution in a competitive higher education world and provides a context for change. Indeed, a strong quality culture encourages and enables change, champions innovation and allows staff to take risks, admit failure and learn from mistakes. However, even a strong quality culture can be characterised by lack of risk taking where the external quality evaluations are 'high stakes' activities and where they encourage compliance rather than improvement.

Barriers to quality culture

There was discussion about the barriers that inhibit the development of a quality culture. In many respects these mirror the characteristics. It was argued that external quality assurance can inhibit the development of a quality culture as, if the assurance process has 'high stakes', then this may lead to risk aversion on the part of academics and administrators. If there is too much to lose as a result of a poor evaluation, the quality culture will be one of compliance and conservatism rather than being expansive, innovative and risk-taking.

The development of a quality culture can also be inhibited in a situation of heterogeneous departmental structures and practices, although that is not to suggest complete uniformity of quality culture across an institution. A quality culture will also be difficult to establish if there is a lack of consistency in policy and strategy and if implementation procedures keep changing.

Incompatibility between quality strategy and quality assurance processes also acts as a barrier to the development of a quality culture, especially if the quality assurance processes are inappropriate — they do not reflect the normal working practices of staff. This is exacerbated if there is a lack of action following internal or external quality reviews. In short, the quality process is not seen as part of everyday life.

A quality culture demands a team-working approach and will be undermined if there is a lack of cohesion, if, to use a metaphor, there are too many soloists in the orchestra. A successful quality culture also attempts to involve everyone in innovative quality improvement.

Internal quality culture and external quality assurance

It was noted, in the discussions, that quality is not a new issue, what is new is the collective formalisation of quality. It was further suggested that external quality assurance procedures are a necessary precursor to building a system of internal quality assurance. Again, though, it would seem that external procedures should be flexible enough to reflect internal procedures and cultures and those internal procedures should not be slavish adherents to external processes if they do not suit the development of a particular culture of quality. There needs to be a symbiotic relationship between internal and external procedures, mediated by the institutional quality culture (or cultures).

In that respect, a degree of autonomy is necessary for the development of a good quality culture that feeds into and embraces the internal quality processes. Indeed, there was a suggestion that if there is a strong quality culture in the institution this provides the basis for improvement and external quality assurance becomes redundant. Along with this was the view expressed that some countries have had too much external evaluation.

In any event it is important that there is strong mutual trust at all interfaces, within the institution and between the institution and the external reviewers and agencies.

There was also a suggestion that employers could be involved more in quality processes and that they can add effectively to the quality culture by providing external experiences that feed into quality enhancement. In many respects, employers appear to be an under-used resource, particularly in professional and applied areas where they could potentially have a useful role.

Types of quality assurance

There was some discussion about the nature and types of external quality assurance. The question was posed as to whether quality assurance is essentially a process or a product? Thus, is the point of quality assurance to encourage continuous improvement or to be a reward based on outcomes? The debate about purposes of higher education quality assurance has been rehearsed elsewhere (Harvey, 2004) and the discussion did not delve into that debate in full but focused mainly on the difference between accreditation and audit. It was suggested that accreditation, with its focus on a binary decision is not quality assurance. Accreditation, it was suggested, has limited impact on quality because it encourages concealment of weaknesses. On the other hand, audit, which is about evaluating the institutional quality assurance procedures, is process-oriented and provides the basis for continuous improvement.

However, there was something of a dilemma when it came to international recognition and there perhaps accreditation has a role. However, that does not mean that all programmes in all institutions need to be accredited, which would be a hugely overblown bureaucratic process, excessively costly and quite unnecessary in institutions that have agency-audited, internal quality assurance systems.

On the international front there was remarkably little in the discussions about the European perspective when it came to internal and external audits. The focus was clearly on the institutional view. Where the *European Standards and Guidelines* were discussed, it was normally in the context of them needing to be contextualised to a national level. In addition, the jury is still out on the articulation between quality assessment and the European Qualifications Framework.

Impact of external quality assurance

In the keynote, Bjorn Stensaker suggested that external quality assurance procedures have an impact on the higher education environment in various ways (see this volume, Stensaker, 2006). Similarly, in a recent conference under the auspices of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, the agency delegates maintained that there was a significant impact from external quality assurance, including on the teaching and learning situation (Harvey, 2006). The discussion groups at the Forum also indicated that external processes had an impact and that it was mainly positive.

However, there was a general agreement from all these sources that there is no simple causal model of impact. At best there are permeable layers, where actions of external agencies and people within institutions work, alongside other external and internal processes, to filter down to specific practices to change curricula, enhance learning.

However, there is at best a suggestion that the external processes may be involved but little hope of showing a direct link. Furthermore, the implementation, for example, of recommendations is not a simple top-down process but one that involves an iterative process of top-down direction and bottom-up implementation. In addition, recommendations from quality evaluations are rarely written in a form, or with such detail, as to specify appropriate innovations that would directly impact on learning and teaching, or, indeed, research. (The third leg, service to community, was almost totally ignored in the discussions of quality processes).

The agencies in their recent conference had suggested that external quality had an impact because it placed a requirement on institutions to take responsibility for students enrolled, reflected in a growing concern over attrition. There have been demonstrable curriculum adjustments and the growth of course evaluations, appeals and complaints procedures. In addition, agencies claim, standards have improved and there are plenty of examples of better ways of teaching.

The discussion suggested that there is little concrete research on the impact of external quality on either learning or research. There was some agreement that there were possible short-term (positive) impacts on learning through self-evaluation processes, which engender changes in practice. Further, student evaluations, as part of external processes, are not afraid to highlight issues around the teaching-learning interface. However, while there may be an initial response to these, as to weaknesses identified in self-evaluations, the impact may be short-term and dissipate in the interval between evaluations.

What is important, though, is that quality assurance legitimises the discussion of teaching. It makes it acceptable to discuss teaching quality and innovation. No longer is it acceptable to consider teaching as something incontestable, done in private behind closed doors. Having said that, though, it is apparent that in many settings, teaching and learning innovation operate quite independently of quality initiatives. The champions of quality tend to be in central administration and learning innovation in separate learning and teaching units or institutes.

A strong quality culture would ensure that learning and teaching innovation and quality processes both internal and external lock in together. In the end, quality culture is about adopting a self-critical reflexive approach as a community: a community of students and staff. Quality processes, internally and externally, if they are improvement-oriented should provide a framework for the effective operation of communicative learning environment.

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