

# **THE NEW COLLEGIALISM: IMPROVEMENT WITH ACCOUNTABILITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A new collegialism is emerging in the wake of managerialist pressure for accountability. It is an approach that is responsible, responsive and transparent and sees quality in terms of transformation of a participant rather than attempting to fit the purpose of a customer. The new collegialism is compatible with a bottom-up and top-down approach to quality monitoring where improvement is driven and controlled by practitioners and audited internally and externally by institutional-based units and sector-wide bodies, respectively. This process, it is argued brings about incremental and sustainable improvement with accountability built in. It does not lead to a compliance culture nor does it sustain academic cloisterism. The focus of the new collegialism is to clearly link quality monitoring with the improvement of teaching and learning.

## Collegialism

Higher education institutions are often assumed to embody a collegiate ethos. A college, in one sense, is nothing more than a community of scholars. However, there is underlying ‘philosophy’ implicit in the notion of collegiality, which will be referred to as ‘collegialism’.

Collegialism is characterised by three core elements:

- a process of shared decision-making by a collegial group in relation to academic matters;
- mutual support in upholding the academic integrity of members of the group;
- conservation of a realm of special knowledge and practice.

There has been a revival of interest in collegialism in the wake of the sustained managerialism of the late 1980s (CVCP, 1985; Green and Harvey, 1993; Hart and Shoolbred, 1993; Holmes, 1993; Trow, 1993)

This revival of interest in collegialism can be characterised as having taken two paths—a conservative tendency and a radical alternative. The conservative tendency attempts to reassert the centrality of academic autonomy. It emphasises the absolute right of the collegial group to make decisions relating to academic matters, regards the integrity of members as inviolable (except where exceptionally challenged from within), and considers the role of the group as that of developing and defending its specialist realm, which is usually discipline-based.

This approach tends to be staff-directed, producer-oriented and research-dominated. It relates to the internal concerns of the group and sees students as novices to be initiated into the mysteries of the discipline. It is effectively inward-looking. The knowledge it possesses is revealed incrementally and according to the dictates of the self-appointed ‘owners’. The skills and abilities it expects students to develop are often implicit and obscure. Sometimes the expectations of students are deliberately opaque and shrouded in mystifying discourse. In short, at one extreme the traditional tendency reflects a medieval cloister.

The radical alternative disavows the inwardness of the cloisterist approach while retaining its scepticism of management-dominated quality assurance processes (Rear, 1994). The radical approach sees the collegial group as the forum for academic decision-making but is prepared to enlarge that group to allow discourse and negotiation with significant others, not least students. It emphasises accountable professional expertise rather than the inviolable academic integrity. Its perceived role is one of widely disseminating knowledge and understanding through whatever learning-facilitation and knowledge-production processes are most effective (Knight, 1994).

The radical tendency is thus outward-looking and responsive to changing circumstances and requirements. It is learning-oriented. It focuses on facilitating student learning rather than teaching, and explicitly encourages the development of a range of skills and abilities. It prefers transparency to obfuscation. It values team work. This radical alternative represents the new collegiate approach to higher education.

Of course, these characterisations are rarely so clear-cut nor evident in practice. They represent two ends of a continuum, and are summed up in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of cloisterism and new collegialism**

<i>Cloisterism</i>	<i>New collegialism</i>
Secretive	Open
Isolationist	Networking
Individual	Team work
Defensive	Responsive
Traditional approach	Innovative
Producer-oriented	Participant-oriented
Clings to power	Empowering
Wary of change	Welcomes change
Elitist	Open access
Implicit quality criteria	Explicit quality criteria
Information provider	Facilitates active learning

### **The new collegialism**

An external focus on quality and accountability has, undoubtedly, been instrumental in the emergence of the new collegialism. The cloisterist response to accountability is further retrenchment, while the new collegiate response has been to reassess the traditional collegiate allegiances and prerogatives. Instead of single-minded focus on the discipline (or profession) and their place within it, new collegiate academics are openly addressing the interests of various ‘stakeholders’ in the education process—not least students (Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992).

This shift, from a narrowly-focussed preoccupation with the discipline to an acceptance of a widened set of responsibilities, is evident in a growing transparency of practices and procedures within higher education. The emphasis, in teaching and learning, is on facilitating active learning through clear identification of aims and outcomes within an integrated approach that links objectives, content, teaching practices, assessment and student attainment (Brown and Knight, 1994; Harvey, 1993; McDowell, 1994). Greater emphasis is being placed on team work to ensure the coherence of the student experience. Dialogue and discussion have traditionally been the hallmarks of research in the collegiate setting and this is being reasserted in the wake of the competitive pressures of individualism.

The new collegialism is self-critical and concerned to continually improve its processes and practices rather than rest content with traditional modes of functioning. Academic autonomy in the new collegialism is manifested through ownership and control of an overt, transparent process of continuous quality improvement rather than in the retention of a non-accountable, mystifying, opaque cloisterism (Rear, 1994; Harvey, 1994b). In short, the new collegialism is about the development of an explicit professionalism (Elton, 1992).

### **Total student experience of learning**

The new collegialism places most emphasis on the *transformative* notion of quality (Harvey and Green, 1993; Barnett, 1992). Other concepts of quality, such as perfection, high standards, fitness for purpose and value for money, 'are *possible* operationalisations of the transformative process that lies at the heart of the concept of quality—they are not ends in themselves' (Harvey, 1994b, p. 51).

In relation to the pedagogic function, the transformative approach is about enhancing and empowering students, which requires a focus on the *total learning experience*: That is, a focus on all aspects of students' experience that impact upon their learning. Learning should be seen in terms of process and outcomes. Learning outcomes include *knowledge acquisition* and the *critical application* of knowledge in a variety of contexts—which requires the development of various '*skills*'.

Thus, a focus on learning is central to the transformative process. The enhancement of the total student experience requires three things: transparency, integration, and dialogue (Harvey, 1994a).

*Transparency* means being *explicit*, clear and open about the *aims* of the programme, the *process* of teaching and learning, the mode and criteria for *assessing* students, and the intended *attainment* of students.

*Integration* requires that these elements are linked together into a cohesive whole so that the aims are reflected in the transformative outcomes and the teaching/learning and assessment process works explicitly towards enhancing and empowering students.

*Dialogue* involves discussions with learners about the nature, scope and style of their learning. For example, discussing the relevance of knowledge and skills; agreeing on appropriate and meaningful assessments; exploring suitable teaching and learning approaches; and so on.

Dialogue also requires teachers to talk with each other about the teaching and learning process. Accepting that teaching and learning is not a private affair between consenting adults (teacher and students). It is a process that should be open and responsive to new ideas and external pressures not secretive and defensive.

Transparency, integration and dialogue go to the heart of the traditional process and challenge the locus of power in higher education. Such notions are not universally popular. Some academics are very sceptical about transparency because they say it makes the educational process too prescriptive. Similarly, integration is part of the intellectual work that student must do, it should not be handed on a plate! And, for some academics, dialogue with students is ridiculous, 'if they knew what's best for them they would not be students'.

A retort might be that perhaps transparency, integration and dialogue are unpopular because they require some work and clear thinking to identify what it is the students are getting from a programme. It is much easier to take a producer view and supply a 'product' (for example, a programme of study) irrespective of user views rather than worry about users and produce a 'product' that users require. Until recently academics working in higher education have tended to disregard user views. Such disdain is unsustainable if students are seen not as users but as *participants* in a transformative process. As such, they are entitled to a *responsive* process that is transparent and integrated and based on dialogue.

### **Accountability or improvement?**

How does this view of transformative, empowering education, driven by a responsive collegiate group, relate to the growing pressure for accountability-driven, external, quality monitoring?

The core of a new-collegiate approach is the development of a quality culture of continuous improvement. This does not necessarily integrate well with approaches that emphasise accountability. Such approaches are primarily concerned with ‘value-for-money’ and assume that improvement will be a secondary function. Requiring accountability, it is assumed, will lead to a review of practices, which in turn will result in improvement. This is a faulty presupposition for three reasons.

First, it is likely that, faced with a monitoring system that demands accountability, academics will comply with requirements in such a way as to minimise disruption. Second, where accountability requires the production of strategic plans, clear objectives, quality assurance systems, and so on, then there may be an initial impetus towards quality improvement. However, there is considerable doubt whether there will be any sustained momentum as a result of this initial push. Accountability systems, in short, are unlikely to lead to a process of *continuous* quality improvement.

Third, accountability approaches tend to demotivate staff who are already involved in innovation and quality initiatives. Not only do they face the added burden of responding to external scrutiny there is also a feeling of being manipulated, of not being trusted or valued, by managers and outside agencies (Harvey, 1994b).

Accountability-led, funding-linked, quality monitoring will, at best, only have a short-term impact on quality. The new collegialism is about continuous quality improvement, driven by a responsive, co-operating group of academics who set their own explicit quality agenda.

In essence, a continuous process of quality improvement shifts the primary emphasis on quality from external scrutiny to internal effective action. In terms of teaching and learning this means devising a quality system that drives improvement from the *staff-student interface*.

So, where does this leave external scrutiny? It would be naive to suppose that external scrutiny and accountability are going to disappear in the near future. The solution is to ensure a system that most effectively uses external quality monitoring to *improve* the student experience, the professionalism of managers or the research process.

This, perhaps, can best be done by developing a top-down process of scrutiny and accountability with a bottom-up process of continuous quality improvement. Such an approach is compatible with the new collegialism. The top-down monitoring would involve a process of auditing the institutions’ own account of its quality. The account could be in the form of a ‘quality report’ based on the cumulative improvement initiatives of collegiate teams. It would operate in principle, in a similar way to the audit of the financial accounts. Instead of statements of account, the institution would need to provide a set of layered accounts of quality, along with supporting evidence (Harvey, 1994b).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In such a process institutional management does not direct or manage quality but provides a context to facilitate quality improvement, in particular, the dissemination of good practice and the delegation of responsibility for quality (Harvey, 1994b). This involves shifting from the confrontational management style that characterised much of higher education in the 1980s to more modern management techniques that may be adapted to an educational context (Crawford, 1991; Marchese, 1991; Chaffee and Sherr, 1992; Clayton, 1992; Geddes, 1992; Gilbert, 1992; Prabhu and Lee, 1992; Sallis and Hingley, 1992; Yorke, 1993).

### *The 'new collegiate' team*

A bottom-up approach to quality improvement requires identifiable teams of academics working together to identify quality targets, setting agendas for action and reporting clearly on intentions and outcomes. The nature and constitution of such teams will vary depending on the type of institution. However, effective functioning for quality-improvement will require that the teams consist of people with a common focus and responsibilities. These might be based on administrative units (such as departments or schools) programmes of study (teachers and administrators servicing a particular course), or subject discipline groupings. In any event, the teams must relate to recognised areas of activity and be able to act as coherent working groups. Team decisions should involve everyone and not be made by managers or team leaders.

The corollary of this is that the team must accept responsibility for continuous quality improvement within its domain. This involves a number of specific team responsibilities including:

- identification of its *area of operation* and the specific aspects of quality that it will monitor: these may relate to teaching and learning, curriculum content, research, external employer-relations, and so on.
- identification and implementation of *procedures for monitoring quality*, such as the introduction of student satisfaction feedback questionnaires. All such procedures must be made explicit and transparent.
- identification of *procedures for improving quality*, such as review and updating of curriculum content and design, staff development and training, staff-student seminars, and so on. In many circumstances, procedures will already exist that can be adopted or easily adapted to fit the proposed approach.
- ensuring that its procedures and improvements are set in the context of a *local self-critical review and strategic plan*. Such a plan will be constrained by the parameters of institutional strategic planning but, within that, should identify longer term goals and, more importantly, one-year, attainable, quality improvements (Harvey, 1994b).

The fourth responsibility is central to an effective process of continuous quality improvement as it provides the mechanism for ensuring transparency, closing the quality loop, and ensuring appropriate action.

A useful mechanism for doing this is an annual report. Many institutions currently expect academics working on a programme of study to provide an annual review. While this is laudable, these reports predominantly tend to be retrospective and are often produced by a programme director rather than a co-operating team. The type of review envisaged in the new-collegiate approach would be one that is predominantly prospective, setting a clear agenda for action. It would also clearly identify how the previous quality-improvement agenda had been fulfilled.

A suggested structure for the content of the report might include the following.

- Setting out *long-term goals* (and indicate how these have changed from previous reports);

- Identifying *areas of action* for the forthcoming year;
- *Reviewing* the previous year's plan of action;
- *Evaluating changes* that have been introduced;
- Reporting on the *quality* of what is provided by the team;
- Commenting on *student evaluations* and those of other relevant stakeholders
- Indicating what will be *done* to address stakeholder views;
- Identifying actual and proposed *changes to procedures* for monitoring and improving quality;
- *Assessing* the suitability of the *research profile* (where appropriate) and the way teaching relates to research;
- *Assessing the teaching and learning process*;
- *Assessing* the level and range of *student attainment* (Harvey, 1994b).

Codifying intentions and outcomes through a quality-improvement report places the *ownership and control* of quality improvement in the hands of the people who are going to effect changes at the staff-student interface, the course development level, the research frontline, and so on. Simultaneously, it places an obligation on the team to systematically address the agenda they set for themselves.

### ***Auditing quality improvement***

Although quality improvement is driven from the bottom-up it must be based on a responsive, outward looking review and appraisal of what is provided. In short, the process will only work at the 'new collegiate' rather than 'cloisterist' end of the collegialism spectrum. The quality-improvement agenda must take into account a range of concerns and different stakeholder perspectives in an open, self-critical manner. It is of no use as a quality improvement tool if it simply looks inwards and is written as a self-congratulatory document.

How can this be achieved? In part it can be achieved through an appeal to the new professionalism that characterises new-collegialism, and which is embedded in the process of delegated responsibility and team-control of the quality process. Such an appeal should not be underrated (although many governments and their agencies are increasingly revealing a fundamental lack of trust in such professionalism).

A second way to ensure that the report is meaningful is for it to be subject to review and discussion by those to whom the report directly refers. For example, a report by a course team should be open to commentary by students and by faculty managers. A report by a faculty management group should be scrutinised by teaching staff and by senior managers, and so on.

A third approach is to adopt a process of external monitoring and checks through an audit system. Each quality report produced by a team should be audited internally

by the institution on an annual basis. The internal audit should also result in an institutional quality report. The single-volume institutional report should be a compilation of the team quality reports added to which is its own self-critical analysis of its institution-wide quality assurance procedures. This report should be subject to external audit on a periodic basis.

#### *Internal audit*

To ensure confidence in the process, internal audits should be undertaken by relatively independent unit reporting directly to the (pro-) vice-chancellor or to senate. If the report is to be a keystone in the process of continuous quality improvement then it is essential that the outputs are not linked in any direct way to funding. If funding is linked there will be little likelihood of self-critical analysis.

To verify the report's conclusions, the internal auditors would probably:

- require clarification of claims made in the report;
- require evidence of unsupported claims;
- undertake an audit trail of the way the quality assurance process operates;
- observe teaching;
- examine output from scholarship and research activities;
- talk to students and other stakeholders.

Internal audits may take place on a periodic basis or at random.

An important feature of the audit should be to collect and disseminate good practice through thorough debriefing sessions. Audit procedures might also be used to suggest, where appropriate, suitable staff-development opportunities.

#### *External audit*

External audit procedures would need to restrict itself to auditing the documentation produced on a regular basis by the institution rather than expect special documents to be produced to order. Institutional documentation might reasonably be expected to include an annual institutional report that fully covers quality-improvement initiatives and outcomes. The full institutional report should be published, or at least lodged with an external independent body, on an annual basis.

The external auditors could comment on the institutional quality report and undertake a more detailed audit on a periodic basis. The detailed audit, probably using peer review, would assess the validity of selected team reports and the effectiveness of the internal audit process. The overall aim of external audit, within this top-down, bottom-up, framework would be to assess whether institutions are fulfilling their mission, provide feedback on how this might be better accomplished and possibly suggest modifications to the mission in the light of changed national circumstances or local requirements.

### **Conclusion**

The approach suggested is contingent upon five elements. First, that quality is seen, essentially, as a transformative process. For teaching and learning, that places the emphasis squarely on the enhancement and empowerment of the student.<sup>2</sup> Improvement should thus focus on the student experience of learning, with a view to continually improving the process of enhancement and empowerment.

Second, that continuous improvement is driven bottom-up. This requires placing trust in the professionalism of academics.

Third, this trust can only be earned in the future if the collegiate group adopts a responsive, open, and empowering approach.

Fourth, there must be a quality improvement process in place that results in effective action. The loop between genuine quality concerns raised by stakeholders and action to effect changes must be closed. It must also include a process of feedback, to relevant, stakeholders, of action that has been taken in relation to their concerns.

Fifth, external monitoring must be sensitive to internal quality improvement procedures. Accountability will result as a consequence of a planned and transparent quality improvement process. Placing a primacy on accountability and hoping that quality improvement will result is likely to inhibit, rather than encourage, a process of continuous quality improvement.

The proposed new-collegiate approach, may be at variance with the managerialist climate created in countries such as Britain, USA and Australasia but is at the heart of models being developed elsewhere, such as Sweden. Under the slogan ‘Liberty for Quality’ authority in higher education is being devolved from the government to the universities and colleges. However, it is simultaneously raising obligations for quality assurance and accountability by institutions (Bauer and Franke-Wikberg, 1993). The obligation on each institution to set-up effective quality assurance systems is not primarily driven by external accountability requirements rather it is:

improvement-oriented, is centred on local responsibility, seeks to employ the smallest amount of necessary information in reporting systems, and puts the emphasis on practical results and operational feedback.... These characteristics describe a highly decentralised self-regulation scheme with the goals of employing only enough regular mutual or collaborative effort as is required to ensure that quality assurance and control are achieved (Kells, 1992, p. 141)

The developing Swedish model aims to ‘build the quality assurance from the bottom-up rather than top-down’ with a view to becoming ‘a *quality-driving instrument*, not an administrative obligation’ (Bauer and Franke-Wikberg, 1993, pp. 4–6).

In summary, the improvement-led approach of the new collegialism involves both a ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ approach embedded in a quality-improvement culture. That culture rests on a new professionalism that is prepared to address issues beyond the mysteries of the academic discipline. It requires a commitment to open, transparent ways of working and the grasping of the responsibility for quality which it is prepared to address overtly and publicly.

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<sup>2</sup> This article has focussed mainly on teaching and learning. In terms of research, transformation would relate to the development of new knowledge or the reconceptualisation of existing knowledge.

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