

Quality in Higher Education Project: Final Report, 1995

Minor edits in this 2017 version removed, *inter alia*, outdated contact details and Appendix 1

Introduction

The *Quality in Higher Education (QHE)* Project was established on 1 September 1991 and formally closed on 31st December 1995. The Project undertook and reported a range of research on the issue of quality in higher education.

Although the Project has formally ended, the Centre *for* Research *into* Quality continues to research many of the areas initiated during the period of the Project.

The Project was established following a conference on quality at the University of Central England (at the time Birmingham Polytechnic) organised jointly by the hosts and the University of Birmingham. The Conference sparked considerable interest in the issue of quality not only within higher education but also from external ‘customers’ including employers, professional bodies, funding agencies, accrediting agencies and, the principal quality assessment organisation in higher education at the time—Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI). Various interested parties including the Departments of Employment and Education, the Universities and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Councils, the three Birmingham universities and ten major companies funded the Project and established a Steering Committee to oversee its work. In the ensuing years the number of organisations linked to the *QHE* Project grew and the composition of the Steering Committee changed.

Throughout the Project the Steering Committee played an important and invaluable role.

1. Well-placed and knowledgeable resource: debate current issues;
2. Provided direction;
3. Provided entry and legitimation.

Project personnel

The project was initiated and subsequently directed by Professor Diana Green, Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University in Central England in Birmingham (UCE). Throughout the duration of the research, the Professor Lee Harvey was the senior researcher and managed the day-to-day running of the Project.

Alison Burrows worked as a full-time researcher on the Project from September 1991 to July 1992. Selena Mason was employed full-time on the Project from June 1994 to June 1995. Sue Moon and Vicki Geall, from the Centre *for* Research *into* Quality at UCE were involved in aspects of the later research for the Project as was Rowen Ward, a one-semester placement student from Brunel University. From 1993, Lesley Plimmer was the Administrator for the Project.

THE *QHE* PROJECT

The Quality in Higher Education (*QHE*) Project was launched in January 1991 at a time when quality was a peripheral concern for higher education. Indeed, five years ago, there was an implicit assumption by many in higher education that ‘university’ and ‘quality’ were synonymous.

The initial goal of the *QHE* project was to produce a methodology for assessing quality (Harvey, 1993). At the time, there was no quality policy in existence nor had any quality assurance or assessment methodology been established. HMI inspected the polytechnic and colleges sector and the university sector was embarking on a pilot to establish a process of academic audit. The Project was intended, from the outset, to inform educational policy on quality issues and the debate around quality in higher education. However, despite this policy orientation, *QHE* has remained an independent research project based at the University of Central England in Birmingham.

The project aimed, initially, to develop a methodology for assessing quality in higher education. It set out to establish what is meant by quality in higher education and how it might be assessed. The project has been through three phases, reflecting the changing importance of quality and the mushrooming of publications and research into quality in Britain and overseas.

Criteria of quality

The initial phase explored the concept of quality, undertook a substantial empirical study to identify criteria by which quality in higher education might be assessed and made recommendations about methodological principles. A major outcome of the first phase was a seminal analysis of definitions of quality in higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993), which suggested that although there are widely differing conceptualisations of quality these can be grouped into five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality. Quality can be viewed as exceptional, as perfection (or consistency), as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformative. In relation to teaching and learning, transformative quality sees the student as a participant in a learning process. It focuses on the enhancement and empowerment of the learner through a learning experience that adds value and equips the participant for life-long learning. The criteria identified by staff, students, employers, accreditors, and quality assurers in the empirical study all pointed to the student learning experience as the principal focus of quality assessment in higher education. This was seen as much more important than traditional indicators of quality: qualification of staff, percentage drop-out and so on. The student experience was not limited to the teaching situation, rather it highlighted the learning situation in its entirety. As an antidote to the evangelical enthusiasm for Total Quality Management at the time, the term Total Student Experience was coined to clearly indicate the appropriate direction of quality monitoring in higher education (Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992).

Employer views

The second phase expanded on the initial exploration of employer views undertaken in Phase One. *Employer Satisfaction* (Harvey, 1994) suggested that employers want to recruit graduates who not only add value but who can cope with change and who are able to help to positively transform their organisation in the face of continuous and rapid change. Employers are looking for graduates who can anticipate change and effectively communicate innovations to colleagues as well as clients and customers. Knowledge is less important than the ability and willingness of graduates to learn and continue learning. Employers displayed dissatisfaction with some aspects

of graduate abilities, notably a variety of communication skills and their ability to creatively solve problems. A large number of recommendations emerged from the research including extending staff development to enhance the ability of staff to assess skills and abilities other than subject knowledge.

In parallel to the research on employer perceptions, a detailed analysis of quality management approaches, especially TQM and BS5750, was undertaken to assess their relevance for higher education. BS5750 was seen as incidental to the central concerns of a university—teaching and research—because it primarily involves documenting procedures to ensure a consistent outcome. Higher education is too fluid and exploratory for this to have any resonance. TQM on the other hand has certain aspects to commend it but they need to be disengaged from the managerialist jargon and hype. Delegated responsibility for quality, team working and the development of a quality culture are all applicable to the higher education context. However, the underlying philosophy of TQM is at variance with the participative approach of higher education. Education does not have ‘customers’ or ‘products’ but has participants in a process of enhancement and empowerment. The report *Quality Assurance Systems, TQM and the New Collegialism* (Harvey, 1995) argued that a better return on investment for higher education would be to foster the newly evolving responsive collegiality rather than expend effort attempting to import and adapt a fundamentally alien management technique.

Professional bodies

The third phase of *QHE* coincided with a revival of interest in the issue of standards. Although an ever-present concern of policy makers and many external stakeholders, standards had been pushed into the background by the rapid growth of interest in quality. One stakeholder group traditionally concerned with standards is the professional bodies and the *QHE* project explored their role in quality and standards monitoring in higher education. Professional education and training is an important aspect of post-compulsory educational provision in Britain and the professional and regulatory bodies specify the nature of the education required for entry to the professions. Professional bodies, although self-interested organisations, also act in the public interest. Their major concern is the identification of threshold standards for potential practitioners. Although some bodies are closely involved in the setting and marking of professional examinations, assessment of standards is increasingly being delegated to institutions that provide the professional education and training. The role of the professional bodies has thus shifted from direct control of standards to indirect monitoring.

Professional bodies are less interested in quality monitoring than they are controlling standards. Indeed, many professional bodies have little to do with quality audit or assessment and tend to focus their quality activities at the level of course accreditation. Although there is a strong desire in some areas to synchronise professional accreditation with other forms of quality monitoring so as to minimise the burden on academics, there is also considerable indifference about harmonising procedures.

Many professional bodies see National Vocational Qualifications as a threat to their academic standards (as competence-based approaches cannot catch the essence of the ‘reflective practitioner’) and to their autonomy and long-term future (Harvey and Mason, 1995).

Policy orientation

The main focus of the research has thus been twofold: first, to undertake detailed empirical studies of the perceptions of different stakeholder groups; second, to closely examine the concepts of quality and standards, and explore various models of quality assurance. The intention has been to suggest appropriate methodological principles and inform policy. The rapidly changing face of quality in higher education both in Britain and abroad has meant that the project has had to be flexible and responsive to changes.

The Project has taken the opportunity to examine quality assurance and assessment procedures in other countries. *QHE* has been closely involved in working with several institutions in Scandinavia and Australasia to develop internal quality processes and procedures: in part as a response to external quality monitoring and in part anticipating such procedures. The analysis of a wide-range of external quality-monitoring arrangements has also suggested principles that are likely to be most effective in the development of external quality monitoring procedures. At root, external quality monitoring is likely to be effective in enhancing the student experience of learning if it prioritises a quality-improvement focus (rather than an accountability focus, as in Britain) and combines a top-down audit of subjects with a bottom-up ownership and control of quality improvement procedures.

Although the Project has now run its course, issues of quality and standards remain a significant concern of policy makers and those working in higher education around the world. The new international journal, *Quality in Higher Education* published by Carfax and edited from the Centre for Research into Quality is testament to the need for further research and dissemination of good practice on a global scale. The *QHE* Project may have come to a formal conclusion, but it lives on in spirit in the future research of the Centre and its international collaborators.

References

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Professor Lee Harvey
Head of the Centre for Research into Quality
University of Central England in Birmingham.