

AUDITING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

An edited version published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 1 June 1996.

The Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has an opportunity to radically reconstruct quality assurance in higher education and establish a meaningful process for the 21st Century. It is time to shift from an accountability game to a meaningful improvement-centred approach to quality. This means doing far more than tinkering ineptly with the current system to avoid upsetting any apple carts. It means sweeping away the whole cumbersome bureaucracy, overblown methodology and multiple layers of assessment, assurance, validation and accreditation.

The quality game that has been played out in Britain has achieved its only viable outcome, it has placed quality on the agenda and ensured some internal processes in institutions to address quality issues — at least when someone outside asks for it! What it has not done, and what it will not do, is to ensure a process of continuous quality improvement.

Other countries have played the accountability game as a device to shake cloisterist complacency. They realise it is a limited game and that unless quality focuses on improvement it is a meaningless pursuit. Australia had a quality assessment procedure which, internationally, was more berated and despised than England's. Three cycles, lasting a year each, involving a crude one-day visit linked to status ranking and significant cash handouts, was considered a quick and dirty approach entirely unable to grasp the subtleties of quality assurance and assessment. Now that process is seen as a remarkably efficient and effective way of giving quality a quick shove into the limelight and of ensuring that universities not only rapidly establish and document quality procedures but also encourage a discussion on purpose and practice. Placing Sydney (an 'ivy league' university) in the second rank following the first year assessment was an inspired move.

The Australian process achieved the accountability aim and provided the initial impetus for improvement. There was no point playing the game any longer, the whole thing would have come apart at the seams. In Britain, we haven't realised that the accountability-led quality game has a limited life. We can't let it go, we have to patch it up and edge it, piecemeal, towards improvement—something for which the current system (with the possible exception of the Welsh strategy) is ill-equipped.

It is time for Britain to recognise that the first phase is finished. In common with many other countries who have played the first phase for a much shorter period of time, it is time to switch to a serious improvement orientation. In the long-term this improvement focus will need to be linked to a revolutionary transformation of higher education, in which issues of funding will overwhelm all other concerns of higher education. In the short term, and probably as a necessary precursor of any long-term ability to deal with the transformative upheavals, quality monitoring, if it is to be worthwhile, must facilitate and encourage a process of continuous quality improvement of the student learning experience.

What we need is a new, much simpler, system of external quality monitoring (EQM) that places emphasis on a process of continuous improvement driven by the people who can effect real change—the teachers, students and learning support staff.

What might this look like? First, we need to make a clear distinction between quality and academic standards. Academic standards should remain the preserve of external examiners ably supported, where appropriate, by professional and regulatory bodies. Second, quality should be subject to a single system. One that audits continuous improvement rather than assesses existing provision or procedures.

Research, discussion and anecdote from around the world illustrates that the most significant element of existing EQM methodologies is self-assessment, which promotes a process of open, responsive collegial reflection on purpose, procedures and practice. This element, more than such things as peer review and statistical indicators, offers the basis for a bottom-up process of continuous quality improvement (CQI) combined with top-down internal and external audit.

The key to a new approach is to identify meaningful teams operating at the learner-teacher interface. These teams should own and set a continuous improvement agenda. Each team, for example a group of staff teaching a 'course' along with student representatives, would set a quality improvement agenda. Rather than the typical course annual report — a retrospective account, written by a tired course director at the end of an academic year that gets filed away and forgotten until the next report has to be written — the continuous quality improvement agenda would be a team-written document at the start of the year identifying not what had happened but what *improvements* will be made in the forthcoming twelve months. Each year the effectiveness and outcomes of last year's improvements strategy would be evaluated and a new twelve-month strategy initiated.

Each team-based CQI agenda would be subject to a 360 degree review by the appropriate dean or head of services, by students and by other teams within the same faculty. This process of 360-degree review would lead not only to the projection of sensible and manageable strategies for improvement but also act as a check on the veracity of improvement claims.

A central internal quality monitoring (IQM) unit collates the reports (including, if appropriate one from the deans and heads of services acting as a middle-management team, subject to a similar 360 degree review). Where there may be concern about the veracity of any report, they should undertake an audit using whatever procedure is appropriate to confirm the content. The unit may also wish to undertake periodic or random audits. A university-wide overview and improvement strategy (including long-term plans), produced by a senior management team including the Vice-Chancellor, would be added to the team reports and the composite document would constitute the university quality report.

This would be the sum total of the quality documentation produced by the institution on an annual basis. EQM would then involve an audit of this quality report in much the same way that the financial accounts are audited. This may occur on an annual, periodic or random basis. Such audits may include inspections, peer review, reference to documentation or statistical indicators as appropriate but would focus entirely on improvement agendas and would comment on the veracity of claims, the appropriateness of the strategy and highlight good practice. The institution quality report and the audit report would be published documents.

This process is simple, emphasises continuous improvement, places the onus on those who can affect change, and gives them ownership and control while engendering a responsive and responsible approach. Accountability approaches have been successful in initiating a quality culture, it is now time for a quantum leap into a new improvement-led approach that will be sustainable in the diverse and radically different system of higher education in the 21st Century.