

# **QUALITY MONITORING AND STUDENT LEARNING\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between quality monitoring and student learning is far from clear. Quality monitoring is undertaken both by agencies external to the higher education institution (HEI) and as part of the internal processes of the HEI. An international comparison of external quality monitoring (EQM) suggests a dominant model of delegated accountability. Three basic elements of the methodology are identified: self-assessment, peer evaluation and statistical indicators. Links to funding, publication of outcomes and the growing burden of EQM on staff are explored.

It is argued that EQM runs parallel to, but rarely engages with, innovations in teaching and learning. EQM is more concerned with accountability than the transformative process of learning central to HE. Although the dominant model has some short-term impact in terms of providing impetus to the development of internal procedures it is debateable whether it encourages a process of enhancement.

It is suggested that EQM should shift its focus from accountability to encouraging the development of continuous quality improvement (CQI) within institutions. A model to encourage CQI, which combines top-down audit with bottom-up improvement, is suggested.

## Introduction

External quality monitoring (EQM) has grown rapidly and has become a significant factor in higher education systems around the world. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, for example, has members in over forty countries, and the number continues to grow each year.

## The nature of EQM

EQM is an all-encompassing term that covers a variety of quality-related evaluations undertaken by bodies or individuals external to higher education institutions. It includes the following.

- External quality audit of internal quality assurance procedures, such as the academic audits of institutions undertaken by the Quality Audit Division of the Higher Education Quality Council in Britain (HEQC DQA, 1993). Institutional audit is a process designed to assess the extent, adequacy or effectiveness of quality assurance *procedures* within institutions.
- External evaluation of institutional status, such as the assessment undertaken by the Consejo Nacional de Universidades in Venezuela, which evaluates and grants licences to new, experimental higher education institutions and continues to evaluate them until they attain full autonomy (Ayarza, 1993).
- Evaluations of community interaction and impact on the local economy, such as the element included in the third round of the Australian quality assessment programme.
- External assessment of institutional provision, such as that undertaken by the Comité National d'Évaluation (CNE), in France, which evaluates each institution holistically (Staropoli, 1991; Ribier, 1995).
- External evaluations of teaching and learning provision at a programme or subject level, such as the evaluations undertaken by the independent Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education in Denmark (Thune, 1993).
- Evaluation and appraisal of research, such as the Research Assessment Exercise conducted by the Funding Councils in Britain (HEFCE/SHEFC/HEFCW, 1993) and the research evaluations undertaken by the Academy of Finland since the early 1980s (Luukkonen and Ståhle, 1990).
- Accreditation of courses or institutions as used, for example, in North America in which non-governmental voluntary associations recognise institutions or programmes that have been found to meet stated criteria of quality (Peace Lenn, 1995; Petersen, 1995).

- Accreditation and validation of programmes of study, such as those undertaken in some countries by professional and regulatory bodies (Harvey and Mason, 1995).
- External examination of students, such as the use of external examiners to monitor standards on undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Britain, Denmark, Ireland and several Commonwealth countries as well as in the technikons in South Africa (Silver, 1993; Warren Piper, 1994).

### **EQM is widespread**

EQM is a feature of all types of higher education systems. At the risk of oversimplification I identify six broad types of higher education system:

- ‘market systems’ such as the USA and the Philippines;
- ‘semi-market’ systems such as Taiwan and Brazil;
- centralised systems such as China;
- newly-devolved systems such as those in Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and Scandinavia;
- the ‘Continental model’ of ‘centralised-autonomy’ found in much of Western Europe including Italy, France and Austria;
- the ‘British model’ of autonomy also found throughout much of the Commonwealth.

### **Quality**

Throughout the world, the quality of higher education is being assessed. This involves operationalising the notion of quality in some way, which in turn requires a clear statement about the concept of quality that is being measured. It appears that far too often, quality assessment and assurance processes have started by determining how quality is to be assessed or reviewed rather than by asking what, fundamentally, is it that is to be assessed.

There are five broad approaches to quality identifiable in relation to in higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993); quality as:

- exceptional;
- perfection;
- fitness for purpose;
- value for money;

- transformative.

The *exceptional* view sees quality as something special. Traditionally, quality refers to something distinctive and élitist, and, in educational terms is linked to notions of excellence, of ‘high quality’ unattainable by most.

Quality as *perfection* sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. In a sense it ‘democratises’ the notion of quality and if consistency can be achieved then quality can be attained by all.

Quality as *fitness for purpose* sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer’s requirements, needs or desires. Theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims.

Quality as *value for money* sees quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the ‘customer’ has a quality product or service. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from higher education reflects a value-for-money approach. Increasingly students require value-for-money for the increasing cost to them of higher education.

Quality as *transformation* is a classic notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge.

Quality issues in higher education are also closely related to issues of standards. Indeed, it is evident that, in debates about the nature and functioning of higher education, there is considerable overlap between the concepts of ‘quality’ and ‘standards’. However, quality and standards are not the same. ‘Standards’ are specified and usually measurable outcome indicators which are used for comparative purposes. In the Editorial to the first issue of the journal *Quality in Higher Education*, I explored the nature of standards and the interrelationship of standards and quality. In view of the discussion at the Conference on this issue, I reproduce the relevant section from Harvey (1995, pp. 9–12) below.

### ***Standards***

In education, standards relate to three areas of activity:

- academic standards;
- standards of competence;
- service standards.

*Academic standards* measure ability to meet specified level of academic attainment. In relation to teaching and learning this refers to the ability of students to fulfil the requirements of the programme of study, through whatever mode of assessment is required. This usually requires demonstration of knowledge and understanding. Implicitly, other skills are assessed, such as communication skills. Sometimes ‘higher

level' skills, such as analysis, comprehension, interpretation, synthesis and critique are explicitly assessed. For research, academic standards are less precise and usually imply the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition.

*Standards of competence* measure specified levels of ability on a range of competencies. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; skills required for induction into a profession; and academic (or 'higher level') abilities, skills and aptitudes implicit or explicit in the attainment of an award. These may be stated or inferred in taught course objectives or be a part of the expectations of competencies to be achieved by research students.

The relationship between academic standards and standards of competence is not clear-cut and, to some extent, is a pragmatic distinction. For some definitions of quality, such as the 'exceptional' approach, the distinction between academic standard and standard of competence is more pronounced than, for example, in the 'transformative' approach (see Table 1).

*Service standards* are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service or facilities provided. Such standards may include turnaround times for assessing student work; maximum class sizes, frequency of personal tutorials; availability of information on complaints procedures, time-lag on introducing recommended reading into libraries, and so on. Benchmarks are often specified in 'contracts' such as student charters. They tend to be quantifiable and restricted to measurable items, including the presence or absence of an element of service or a facility. *Post hoc* measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) are used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.

### ***Interrelationship between quality and standards***

The interrelationship between quality and standards depends on the approach to quality and the particular notion of standard. With five 'definitions' of quality and three 'definitions' of standards there are fifteen interrelationships (see Table 1).

The exceptional approach to quality emphasises the maintenance of academic standards, through the summative assessment of knowledge. It presumes an implicit, normative 'gold-standard' both for learning and for research. It continues to advocate élitism, even within a mass education system. It prioritises knowledge over skills, other than 'high-level skills' or professional competence. The approach presumes that service standards are dependent on inputs such as well-qualified staff, well-stocked libraries, well-equipped laboratories and students with good entry qualifications. There is a reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.

The perfection approach emphasises consistency in external quality monitoring of academic, competence and service standards. Its emphasis on a consistent process producing a defect-free output is inconsistent with the exploratory nature of higher learning. Its principal focus within institutions is on flawless and accessible administrative support systems.

The fitness-for-purpose approach relates standards to specified purpose-related, objectives. Therefore, in theory, it requires criteria-referenced assessment of students.

However, as purposes, as specified in mission-statements or course aims, often include a comparative element criteria-referencing is mediated by norm-referenced criteria. The approach tends towards explicit specification of skills and abilities and requires clear evidence by which to identify threshold standards. Professional competence is primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. Purposes usually specify or imply minimum service standards for such things as professional standards of competence of service providers, support for students, both academic and pastoral, and the interrelationship of teaching, scholarship and research.

The value-for-money approach places emphasis on a 'good deal' for the customer or client, usually government, employer, student or parents. It requires the maintenance or improvement of academic standards, of both graduate abilities and research output, for the same (or declining) unit of resource. It also expects the maintenance of the supply of competent recruits to post-graduation professional bodies and suitably skilled graduates for employment. Similarly, the approach expects that the teaching and learning experienced by students does not significantly decline and, indeed, that innovations improve the experience in relation to clearly specified objectives. Minimum service standards are frequently specified in student charters. Students expect that the academic standard of their course and the competencies they acquire will have currency outside the institution and will be an adequate return on their investment of time and money. The value-for-money approach prioritises efficiency and accountability to 'clients' and 'customers'.

The transformative approach uses standards to assess the enhancement of students both in terms of academic knowledge and a broader set of transformative skills, such as analysis, critique, lateral thinking, innovation, and communication. As transformation involves empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed in terms of impact in relation to objectives. Service standards emphasise the specification facilities that enable the process of student learning *and* the acquisition of transformative abilities.

### **Dominant approach to EQM**

The organisation, degree of government control, extent of devolved responsibility and funding of higher education systems vary considerably from one country to the next. However, the rapid changes taking place in higher education are tending to lead to a convergence towards a dominant model. This approach is predominantly accountability-led and consigns quality improvement to a secondary role. It can be described as a system of *delegated accountability*.

What appears to be happening is a convergence, from very different starting points, to a dominant form of accountable autonomy (Figure 1). The systems that have traditionally espoused a market approach and those that have been influenced by the traditional British system of autonomous institutions supported by the State are finding their autonomy being eroded by government-backed requirements to demonstrate accountability and value for money (Bauer and Kogan, 1995).

In countries, such as New Zealand, with a tradition of strong university autonomy, there is now a requirement for higher education institutions to define objectives that are approved by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 1991). Similarly,

in Australia, financial stringency has been used to legitimate the requirement placed on universities to develop quality assurance procedures to provide accountability for public funds (Baldwin, 1992; NBEET HEC, 1992).

Where central control was, or continues to be, exerted over higher education, for example in Eastern Europe, South America and Scandinavia as well as China, there is increasing delegated responsibility for quality, but at the price of being required to be accountable and open to scrutiny.

There are many examples of this convergence. The issue is whether the delegated accountability model in any way relates to, or impacts on, the student learning experience. I will come to this by exploring the extent to which the dominant approach to EQM addresses *transformative* learning.

### **Methodology of the dominant model**

The convergence to accountable autonomy is reflected in the commonality of EQM methodology. Although there are differences in the focus of evaluations and status of the EQM agencies the methodology incorporates various combinations of three basic elements (Green and Harvey, 1993; Frazer, 1995):

- a self-assessment;
- peer evaluation, normally in the shape of an institutional visit;
- statistical or performance indicators.

The emphasis is on the self-critical academic community rather than direct external inspection of provision. In those countries where a new accountable autonomy is being granted, self-assessment is seen as indicative of the shift to self-governance. In those countries where universities have traditionally been autonomous, self-evaluation is seen as not only politically pragmatic but a necessary vehicle to ensure the institution focuses its attention on quality issues.

It seems that the most valuable aspect of self-assessment is the process itself. It encourages people to reflect on what they do and, more importantly, to communicate openly with colleagues. It acts as a useful means for developing an open collegialism.

A process of self-evaluation 'checked' by peer review in one way or another is the norm in countries as diverse as the USA, the Argentine, Brazil, Mexico, Britain, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Australia, South Africa, and China. In most countries self-evaluation, while guided by an indicative framework, is mediated by reference to the 'mission' of the institution, to allow for diversity within the system. Peer review usually includes a 'visit' by a group of 'respected' academic peers to the institution being evaluated. Most countries outside the British Isles do not include direct observation of the teaching situation as part of peer evaluation.

The proposals for South Africa are to adopt this dominant methodology of self-assessment and peer review. But why? Just because other countries do it in other contexts does not mean that it is suitable for South Africa. Peer review is expensive,

and in a large country like South Africa with considerable travel costs it may be prohibitive. There may be more pressing claims on the limited education budget. Furthermore, although peer review gives a sense of 'legitimacy' to the proceedings and is more acceptable to autonomous universities it is not necessarily an efficient or effective procedure. If the peer review is to be at all consistent then peer reviewers need to be trained in the procedures. This adds costs. There is also opportunity cost to the universities who lose the services of the reviewers. However well trained peer reviewers are, they tend to retain their preconceptions of a good educational experience based on the practices in their own institutions. Perhaps a well-trained inspectorate would be better? Maybe visits are not necessary at all. Perhaps the whole process can be done by centralised auditors using documentary evidence supplied by universities. It is important that the methodology *follows* from a careful consideration of what South Africa needs, rather than a methodology agreed upon and then a rationale sought!

Performance or statistical indicators play a role in quality monitoring methodologies, and some countries such as Australia are working on developing new indicators. In other countries, the advent of EQM has resulted in a de-emphasis of quantitative indicators. In England, for example, performance indicators were expected to play a significant role in the subject assessment methodology. As the methodology was piloted, and subsequently amended, the quantitative indicators were reduced in importance and became re-labelled as 'statistical indicators'. In Tennessee, the first American State to develop a process of accountability-based external monitoring, there has been a marked shift away from broad quantitative performance indicators to qualitative assessments (Banta, 1995).

### **Openness and explicitness**

There is also a growing openness and explicitness about quality and standards in higher education. This is evident in the increased transparency of provision within institutions on the one hand and in the openness of the evaluation procedures and outcomes on the other. EQM has been a major force in encouraging higher education to specify institutional 'missions' and programme aims and objectives (Mercaddo del Collado, 1993). Similarly, course content, student assignments and programme outcomes have been made explicit as a result of EQM, often for the first time. Likewise, EQM can lead to an increased sensitivity towards teaching and learning methods (Chan and Sensicle, 1995).

Most countries have open EQM procedures: the methodology and criteria on which evaluations and assessments are based are available to those being evaluated. However, there is less consistency about the dissemination of outcomes. Publication of EQM outcomes varies from limited circulation 'confidential' papers to full, publicly available documents, as, for example, in France, Denmark and Britain. Sometimes publication is accompanied, as in Korea, by high profile announcements in the mass media about the quality assessment outcomes.

Publication is assumed to be in the interests of accountability. Publication of evaluation reports supposedly:

- ensures that the sense of accountability of higher education institutions towards society will increase (Ifrim, 1995);
- provides external stakeholders, such as professional bodies and employers, with information about programmes or institutions (Harvey and Mason, 1995, p. 44);
- provides potential students (and their parents) with information on which to base choices.

However, it is questionable whether potential students assiduously scrutinise quality monitoring reports. There is little evidence that applicants to courses read quality assessment reports in Britain, nor is there evidence that they read institutional quality audit reports. There are, realistically, only two ways that potential students encounter information from external quality monitoring reports. First, those parts selectively quoted in institutional prospectuses and other recruitment publicity, and second, those parts taken out of context and used to construct league tables, charts or 'Good University Guides'. While this repackaging of the information makes it generally more accessible, it is often fraught with dangers of interpretation and is usually devoid of 'health warnings'.

Publication of comparative data has been seen as a major plank of quality *improvement* within an accountability-led approach. Where the focus is on review of what is provided, rather than on building enabling processes into EQM, the only way to encourage any improvement or to disseminate good practice seems to be to make monitoring outcomes public. The consumerist argument is that prospective 'customers' have the right to comparative information on which to base their choices and customer demand will expedite change.

In Australia, for example, publication linked to league tables is seen as a major incentive to universities. 'When we started out, money was the big incentive. But after the first report, some institutions would have been happy to give the money up if they could have got into group one' (Wilson in Maslen, 1995, p. 8). However, this process is not fundamentally about improvement but about status. The quality programme is perceived as relating to the prestige of institutions and has little if anything to do with the total learning experience of students. 'Suddenly, where a university was on the ladder counted for a great deal. And it was not just parochial prestige, either. International reputations were at stake, not to mention the prospect of overseas students taking their fees elsewhere' (Maslen, 1995, p. 8).

The view that publication provides a spur to quality improvement is resisted in some places on the grounds that comparisons are neither meaningful nor likely to aid a process of continuous quality improvement. In Ontario, for example, the evaluation reports of graduate programmes have been kept confidential to encourage an improvement process and only the final summative judgement were published to inform funding decisions (Filteau, 1993). Institutions in Ontario expressly opposed rankings on the grounds that they drive institutions to conformity and homogeneity rather than promote improvement of quality in the context of diversity.

Publication of reports, especially if linked to league tables, is seen as to have an intimidating effect (OCUA, 1992; van Vught, 1991). The standard argument in favour of confidential proceedings is that self-evaluations will be more honest and critical. However, for some, openness is 'a cardinal point in regard to the overall target of making evaluation the platform for qualified knowledge of the merits of various study programmes. The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education has therefore decided that procedures and methods must be known and all report findings published or made available' (Thune, 1995, p. 12).

The proposal of the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU) in South Africa to keep reports confidential seems naive in the light of inevitable government requirements for accountability. Publication is the least painful way of accommodating political requirements for accountability.

### **Linking EQM to funding**

Linking quality assessment to funding has been an area that has caused considerable debate and one where there appears to be a rift in the dominant approach with some countries making a direct link between EQM and funding and others proposing, at most, an indirect relationship. Britain and Australia make some more or less direct link between EQM outcomes and funding as do several states in the USA, including Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina, Texas, Arkansas and New Mexico.

A funding link is seen as necessary if EQM is to have any direct impact on the quality of provision, since funding is the single motivating factor to which institutions will respond. On a negative note, the 'accountability-led' view of quality improvement is dependent on the effectiveness of a funding sanction. Without a funding link, evaluations are seen to have no 'teeth' (Filteau, 1993, p. 14). The link tends to reward excellence and in some cases withdraw funding from 'unsatisfactory' or 'poor' provision. No attempt is made to redirect resources to enhance inadequate provision.

In Australia, the injection by the government of a significant amount of money (Aus\$70m per year), contingent on EQM ratings, has supposedly generated considerable change. There is a view that the quality initiative has given the reformers in Australian institutions the support to undertake activities and initiate changes that the previous inertia had made it difficult to do (Maslen, 1995; Massaro, 1995; Baldwin, 1995).

The direct linking of funding to quality may have an impact on institutional management, particularly with increasing delegated responsibility. However, it is likely to have much less of an impact on academic staff, and subsequently on the quality and nature of teaching and research.

Many countries have avoided linking quality monitoring directly to funding. There is no direct link, for example, between evaluation and the level of funding in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Portugal or Brazil. However, in some cases, the absence of a direct link can be misleading. In the Argentine, for example, there is no proposed direct link between quality monitoring and funding: indeed, it has been forcefully opposed (Lobo, 1993). However, a *de facto* link is being made by linking quality to funded development projects through the Fund for the Improvement of University

Quality (FIUQ) a World Bank backed initiative. Resources of the FIUQ will be allocated by taking into account academic quality, using such indicators as faculty qualifications and publications, internal efficiency and the outcome of peer review (Marquis, 1995).

The objection to a direct link is that it inhibits the external quality monitoring process. A direct link is seen as:

- threatening and unlikely to result in a meaningful evaluation of provision;
- leads to excessive concerns with the monitoring methodology rather than developing an improvement focus;
- inhibits innovation
- leads to the emergence of a ‘compliance culture’ (van Vught and Westerheijden, 1992).

Arguably, compliance is exactly what is wanted, whether by autonomous or financially-coerced means. Nevertheless, the issue is not one of compliance but of the educational philosophy to which institutions are complying (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995). The issue, then, is not whether quality should be linked to funding but whether funding can be used as an incentive to improve the student learning experience or whether the link acts merely to ensure that institutions conform to accountability requirements.

### **Accountability, improvement and transformative learning**

Higher education policy in the last decade has increasingly been concerned with value for money as the sector has expanded. The notion of ‘quality’ has been employed as a vehicle to legitimate a policy of steadily reducing unit of resource and increasing centralised control.

In many countries, the primary concern has been with accountability rather than improvement and, at root, quality policy has not addressed transformative learning.

There is a tension between accountability and continuous quality improvement (Vroeijenstijn and Acherman, 1990). This tension is clearly evident in external quality monitoring arrangements. Accountability is about value for money and fitness for purpose and sees quality in those terms. Continuous improvement in teaching and learning is about enhancement of the student experience, empowering students as life-long learners.

The accountability-led view sees improvement as a secondary function of the monitoring process. Such an approach argues that a process of external monitoring of quality, ostensibly for purposes of accountability, is likely to lead to improvement as a side effect. Requiring accountability, it is assumed, will lead to a review of practices, which in turn will result in improvement. This, I suggest, is a mistaken 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 to their existing academic practices.

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, 1994).

EQM becomes a top-down control mechanism, which places responsibility for quality in the hands of institutional managers, rather than those at the student-staff interface who can deliver improvement.

In turn, academic staff distrust the EQM process, which they see as a managerialist ploy, either threatening their job or requiring increased productivity without increased resources (Amaral, 1995). The following view from South America could just have easily been voiced in any other part of the world:

Higher academic authorities and high-level professors seem to be more convinced as to the need for and usefulness of establishing some sort of evaluatory process, than most university teachers. The latter generally view these processes as mechanisms for controlling people (at a risk to their academic careers or their tenure), rather than as elements contributing to a better understanding of an institution's shortcomings and strengths. (Ayarza, 1993)

The accountability-led approach to EQM implies that staff will only address quality issues if they are coerced into doing so. The bureaucratic top-down quality monitoring process is a response to the perceived cloisterism in higher education. The implicit argument is that external scrutiny forces institutional managers and teaching staff to review existing practices and procedures. Such a review will, it is presumed, focus attention on shortcomings, open debates about the nature of teaching and learning, encourage systematic and receptive assessment of views of students and employers, and so on. Indeed, proponents of the accountability-led approach argue that, without the pressure of an external monitoring process, it is unlikely that any substantial and rapid innovation will ever take place in higher education, given the conservatism embedded in academic autonomy.

The question remains, though, can a process that is imbued with confrontational procedures, designed to engage cloisterism through checking, actually lead to *sustained* improvement? Accountability-led, funding-linked, quality monitoring will arguably only have a short-term impact on quality and is much more likely to lead to a compliance culture in the long-term. Its main impact will be to awaken management and academic staff to possible financial gains and losses and alert them to a new set of

rules and procedures that need to be played out. The impact on quality improvement will be rapidly dissipated. Accountability-led quality monitoring will thus have no long-term impact on a process of continuous quality improvement, a view endorsed by people close to the EQM improvement process in Britain and New Zealand:

Unless providers are able to draw upon intrinsic motivation to achieve improvement, the best that can be hoped for is a level of compliance with external requirements. Compliance may pass for improvement in the short term, but as soon as the need to display 'improvement' has passed, old habits are likely to re-emerge. (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995, p. 263)

At root, accountability-led EQM is underpinned by an ideology of financial stringency while improvement-led EQM is preoccupied with the empowerment of the learner. The way forward is to prioritise and engage the transformative process, an approach singularly lacking in existing EQM approaches.

### **An alternative approach to EQM**

I would like to suggest an alternative approach to EQM. If South Africa wants to adopt an institutional audit approach then the British model, based on HEQC's audits is fine. It has no teeth and no compulsion for anyone to change but it does at least ensure that some of the quality procedures are documented. It encourages clear articulation of missions and programme aims, which is fine. It does not, I suggest, make much impression on the teaching and learning situation, nor does it provide the impetus for continuous quality improvement.

If South Africa wants to have programme assessment of quality, for accountability reasons, then it need look no further than SERTEC, which is working closely with professional bodies in the Technikon sector. I am not convinced these provide any impetus for continuous quality improvement but they appear to do an effective and efficient job of assessing what is on offer and ensure some immediate rectification of unacceptable quality. There is no point in the universities re-inventing that wheel.

On the other hand, I would suggest something where the emphasis is clearly on a process of continuous quality improvement that impacts on student learning.

Through the *QHE* research undertaken at the Centre for Research into Quality at UCE, we have demonstrated that most stakeholders — students, staff, employers, professional bodies higher education agencies — have a definite view that quality is related to the learning process.

Given the importance that stakeholders attach to the quality of learning, I would like to offer a view of how quality assurance systems might be developed that support such teaching, learning and assessment processes. An appropriate system of EQM must, therefore, embrace a transformative notion of quality and ultimately examine ways in which students are being empowered as life-long learners. Such a model should:

- see EQM as facilitating and ensuring a process of *continuous quality improvement* rather than bureaucratic accountability;

- facilitate *bottom-up* empowerment of those people who can effect improvement;
- enable *top-down audit* of the continuous quality improvement process;
- be *efficient*, non-burdensome, rational and effective.

The proposal is distinct from external assessment controlled from outside the institution and from audit of quality assurance procedures. The model emphasises internally-driven quality improvement. External monitoring would assess the legitimacy of the improvement claims, while simultaneously reviewing standards. In short, the external monitoring would audit the claims about quality and standards that are annually codified in examiners' reports, course reports and so on (see Figure 2).

### **Continuous quality improvement**

The focus on continuous quality improvement (CQI) is a deliberate attempt to move EQM into a second, and more effective stage. The process to date can be likened to launching a spacecraft on a voyage of discovery.

Accountability-driven EQM provides the initial thrust to get the launch rocket off the ground. In some cases this is sufficient to ensure the spacecraft successfully goes into orbit. In others, the initial impetus is insufficient and the rocket crashes back to ground before the spacecraft gets into orbit. The best that accountability-led EQM can do is to get the spacecraft in orbit, but eventually the orbit will decay and the craft get burned-up on re-entry. To set off on a voyage of discovery requires more than initial momentum: it requires a process that encourages and facilitates the desire and motivation for change. In the second-phase of EQM, it is vital that the emphasis shifts from accountability to improvement and that, in the case of teaching and learning, the process is one of continuously improving the student experience.

External monitoring could change its focus and emphasis to improvement but it would only be effective were there unambiguous support for continuous quality improvement from strategic managers in institutions. Such commitment also requires them to accept a facilitating role.

### **Bottom-up empowerment**

If the emphasis is to be on improvement, then EQM must empower those who can effect the improvement—the student, the teacher, the researcher. This is an issue of ownership and control of the improvement process. EQM in most countries is owned and controlled by external agencies and institutional managers. Disputes relate to issues of accountability, such as whether the external agencies are government-owned and controlled; whether they are independent or directed collectively by the higher education institutions; and the appropriate balance between internal autonomy and external control of quality monitoring.

Adopting a CQI approach recasts the issue of ownership and control. The emphasis shifts from concern about ownership and control of quality monitoring agencies to the

ownership and control of the quality improvement process. Reviewing a recent evaluation procedure established at the University of Bergen, Sigurd Trageton and Edmund Utne (1995, p. 13) conclude:

The be-all and end-all of a successful venture to safeguard and improve quality in research and teaching is that the chosen model for an evaluation is accepted by the academic environments. This is difficult to achieve if those to be assessed are not given a reasonable opportunity of exerting influence on the scheme and its implementation.

Although continuous quality improvement needs to be 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.

### ***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. It is important that the teams ultimately self-select as they need to be coherent working groups. 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. It is imperative that the team operates as a unit and that decisions are team decisions and not imposed by a team leader or by an external senior manager.

Team-building is very important but getting such teams together is not always easy, especially among academic staff, given the individualism of much teaching and a reluctance to spend time on pedagogic issues when a much higher return for effort appears to be achievable from research activity. There is no immediate prospect of fundamental change, on an international scale, in the reward and recognition procedures in higher education. Thus 'local' tactics are required to encourage the development of 'new collegiate' teams, including:

- placing a requirement on identified teams to document their agenda for improvement;
- ensuring that students are members of all such teams;

- making it clear that teams can make whatever decisions they think appropriate and have clear ownership of the improvement agenda;
- providing a clear focus, in the first instance, on a limited range of issues.

A suggested focus for initial team deliberation is the assessment of student work. The team might consider what is being assessed, why and how. It might identify the assessment profile of a typical student undertaking a programme of study and examine the range of assessment tasks, and the variety of elements being assessed. In particular, it might consider whether transformative learning is being encouraged through the assessment system. If a complex modular system is in operation, teams dealing with different clusters that might be taken by a student should exchange information about assessment processes. Assessment acts as a Trojan Horse, because an exploration of the rationale and practice of student assessment leads to questions about the coherence, transparency and integration of the learning experience (Brown and Knight, 1994).

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 the team will monitor: these may relate to teaching and learning, curriculum content, research, external employer-relations, and so on;
- specification of appropriate mechanisms for *assessing and maintaining standards* and procedures for action in the case of inappropriate standards;
- identification and implementation of *procedures for monitoring quality*, such as obtaining student feedback about their learning experience. 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, 1994).

This fifth 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.

### *Use of annual report to set agenda*

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 by 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. It should be succinct, cross-refer to policy documents and to reports of student feedback, examiners' reports, and append details of recent publications, staff development workshops and research funding.

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, 1994).

The whole team must be involved in the production of the report (even if one person, on a rotating basis, edits the final version) because it provides a focus for exploring quality issues and is an important element in the culture of quality improvement.

It goes without saying that the report must address the realities of the situation, be honest and reflective if it is to serve the purpose that is required. It is of no use at all if it is just a self-serving eulogy.

How can a realistic quality report be achieved? In part it can be achieved through an appeal to professionalism 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 (Annan, 1993).

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. While it is necessary that the team produces the report as an operating unit, it is also important that it takes account of the people to whom it is responsible and of those who have responsibility to it. 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. Extending this to a full 360-degree appraisal of the quality report by having parallel teams commenting on each others' reports would help disseminate good practice, encourage dialogues between different subject areas and provide another level of critical scrutiny (Figure 2).

A third approach is to adopt a process of external monitoring and checks through an audit system. This would involve top-down monitoring of the setting and achievement of the quality agenda. Despite the direct monitoring of reports through a system of review and commentary by those to whom it refers (the customer-supplier chain in TQM-speak), there are also four reasons why reports should be more formally audited. First, it would be naive to presume that a quality culture will be so pervasive that an appeal to professionalism and delegated responsibility will suffice to ensure the adequacy of the system. In short, some people will be less inclined to take up the challenge of team-based self-regulation than others. Second, there is a need for an institutional overview in order to inform strategic decisions. Third, there may be very different conceptions of what constitutes a quality higher education provision, especially in the early years of such a system. Fourth, it will thus be imperative that the audit process also involves dissemination of good practice and operates within a remit of substantial staff development.

### **Top-down audit**

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. 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.

Top-down auditing should operate at two levels: internal audit conducted within the institution on a frequent, comprehensive basis and an external audit on a periodic or irregular basis conducted by a national or regional agency.

The top-down monitoring 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 and standards, along with supporting evidence.

### ***Internal audit***

Each quality report produced by a team should be audited internally by the institution on an annual basis. This may involve simply receiving and reading the documentation or it may require some investigation of elements of the claims being made.

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. Reporting at the most senior level gives clear signals of the importance of the process and gives a high profile to improvement activity.

If the report is to be a keystone in the process of continuous quality improvement, then it is essential that the conclusions are not linked in any direct way to internal funding allocations. If funding is linked, there will be little likelihood of self-critical analysis. The central function of the report is to identify action for future improvement.

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.

An important aspect of the process of audit is that it should lead to effective action. The direction of action is set by the bottom-up process of team-defined, improvement agenda-setting. However, the audit process must ensure that the agenda is pursued assiduously. Feedback must be given to those who provide assessment information and effective action for improvement must be seen to take place. This requires that clear lines of responsibility and of reporting are established. In collegiate institutions (such as the older British universities and many European universities) this may be more difficult to establish than in institutions with a more hierarchical management structures (such as the ex-Polytechnics in Britain).

In the South African setting, I think the most important role for the QPU would be to assist universities in the development of such internal quality audit units. The focus I have suggested on a rolling, bottom-up, agenda for action to sustain continuous quality improvement is in tune with the principles underpinning the QPU.

### ***External audit***

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, including improvement agendas, complemented by its own self-critical analysis overview of quality improvement and standards issues. The full institutional report

should be published, or at least lodged with an external independent body, on an annual basis. This report should be subject to external audit on a periodic basis.

The aim of the external audit will be to assess the quality of provision and the adequacy of quality procedures and relate them to the self-critical appraisals. In essence, this top-down, bottom-up framework, would:

- assess whether institutions are doing the job they set out to do (fulfilling mission);
- explore how this might be done better (disseminating good practice);
- possibly suggest modifications to the mission in the light of changed national circumstances or local requirements.

External audit 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. The external auditors could comment on the institutional quality report and undertake a more detailed audit on a periodic basis to authenticate the claims. The detailed audit, probably using peer review, would assess the validity of selected team reports and the effectiveness of the internal audit process. This might involve direct observation of the teaching and learning process, examination of available resources, assessment criteria and so on.

The independent audit should result in a public report (with an executive summary and brief reply paper) that focuses on the effectiveness of the improvement process. A public report would not only help satisfy accountability expectations but would provide additional impetus to the process of continuous quality improvement.

In the South African context it maybe appropriate for the QPU to undertake the external audits. If so, then it is vital that the outcomes are published to ensure accountability within an improvement-oriented process.

This improvement-led approach, despite an external audit, differs from an accountability-led approach in several ways:

- it is driven by a bottom-up process of continuous quality improvement;
- it evinces trust in the work force and delegates responsibility for quality to them;
- external audit responds to internal initiatives rather than directly sets the agenda;
- improvement-led external audit is able to develop a strategic perspective rather than spend time on the detail of internal quality assessment procedures;
- audit processes at all stages are linked to staff development;

- it identifies the ways in which the ultimate responsibility of institutions for quality can be put in practice;
- it would be a relatively cheap approach, far less expensive, for example, than current accountability checks in Britain.

### **Efficient and effective**

South Africa, as was mentioned many times in the Conference, should adopt a process that is simple and as cheap as possible. There are enormous pressures on the education budget. The proposed EQM process is simple and probably as cheap as possible. A single external auditing agency would be required to fulfil this audit function. Not only is this improvement-led approach relatively cheap in absolute terms, but it also has low opportunity cost. Only needing a single external monitoring organisation and a single set of visiting peers (or inspectors), it would substantially cut the cost to the institutions and the tax-payer. The cost to institutions would be low, as the external audit would be solely of internal quality monitoring processes and would require no special documentation. Furthermore, the opportunity cost would be far smaller because effort expended would be directly linked to quality *improvement*. In short, institutions would be investing in internal continuous improvement rather than wasting money on a cumbersome quality bureaucracy. The tax-payer would be paying for a streamlined quality auditing body.

The team-based quality report, which might appear an extra burden, would, in many cases, replace (or at the very least inform) annual course reports, which are now widespread in higher education. Furthermore, in the long run, the annual team report can be used to directly feed into external quality assessment or audit processes and thus minimise or eliminate the need for additional documentation in the event of an audit or assessment visit.

Producing a quality report may have an unintended detrimental effect if teams see it as an unnecessary extra pressure. The quality improvement agenda may become overly bureaucratised and possibly fossilise an informal and dynamic process. This could possibly occur if institutional managers and external auditors require a set format for team reports and agenda. Despite such misgivings, it is more likely that a quality report will help to clarify the informal process of improvement, which is frequently less complete, explicit and transparent than it might be. The whole approach is also compatible with the outcomes of the recent trial audits undertaken on behalf of the Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents and Vice-Chancellors of the European Universities.

### **Contingent features of the proposed approach**

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. 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.

## Conclusion

An effective model is one that develops a quality culture of continuous improvement. Such a model shifts the primary emphasis on quality from external scrutiny to internal effective action. In terms of teaching and learning, for example, this means devising a quality system that drives improvement from the *staff-student interface*. However, accountability is ensured through external quality monitoring, which audits the quality activities of effective teams, in much the same way that the financial accounts are audited.

Continuous quality improvement must, then, be driven from two directions: bottom-up and top-down. The key is to encourage and ensure the former, whilst developing a sensitive but effective external monitoring process.

In the end, the approach proposes the development of a quality-improvement culture that is contingent upon trusting the professionalism of the workforce. This is not a mystifying professionalism wrapped up in a cloak of isolationist academic autonomy, but an academic professionalism that embraces openness, dialogue and transparency.

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**Table 1: Relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance (items in parentheses are indirect assurance mechanisms)**

Source: Adapted from Harvey (1995a)

<i>Standards Quality</i>	<i>Academic standards</i>	<i>Standards of competence</i>	<i>Service standards</i>	<i>Organisational standards</i>
Exceptional	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative gold standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Élitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards in a mass education system.	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional) skills.	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc. 'guarantee' service standards. Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.	Clear role hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on 'traditional values'. Strong emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom. Aversion to transparency.
	Assured by: Standards monitoring Research assessment Teacher assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring Professional accreditation	Assured by: Accreditation (Performance indicators)	Assured by: Institutional Accreditation (Audit of quality processes)
Perfection or consistency	A target level of academic standard is consistently achieved (year on year).	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for 'zero defects'.	Primarily relates to reliable and consistent student grading and to administrative processes, such as accuracy and reliability of record keeping, timetables, coursework arrangements.	Right first time. Document procedures, regulations and good practice. Obtain ISO9000 certification.
	Assured by: (Standards monitoring)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation)	Assured by: Participant/user feedback (Audit) (Assessment)	Assured by: External QM certification (Accreditation)
Fitness for purpose (Fitness of purpose)	Theoretically, standards should relate to the defined objectives that relate to the purpose of the course (or institution). Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although as purposes often include a comparative element (e.g., in mission statement) these are mediated by norm-referenced criteria.	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. This is similar to excellence approaches to checking minimum standards.	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed in terms of (minimum) standards for the purpose — usually teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic), other facilities. Purpose is, for students, often judged against expectations.	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based purposes.

	Assured by: Assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation Subject assessment)	Assured by: Customer charters/ surveys (Accountability audit) (Assessment) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Institutional accountability audit
Value for money	Maintenance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. That is, ensure greater efficiency. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience (qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment.	Maintain or improve the output of generally 'employable' graduates for the same unit of resource. Similarly, ensure a continual or increasing supply of recruits to post-graduation professional bodies. Provide students with an educational experience that increases competence, in relation to career advancement, which ensures a return on investment.	Customer satisfaction analyses (student, employers, funding bodies) to assess process and outcomes. Students and other stakeholders are seen as 'paying customers'. Customer charters specify minimum levels of service (and facilities) that students (parents, employers) can expect.	Relies heavily on periodic or <i>ad hoc</i> reviews of whether organisational structure is effective and efficient, often informed by management information (especially basic output statistics).
	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Customer surveys and charters (Performance indicators)	Assured by: (Institutional accountability audit) (Performance indicators)
Transfor- mation	Assessment of students' acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. As transformation includes empower- ment, formative as well as summative assessment is require- d. Transformative research standards are assessed on their <i>impact</i> in relation to objectives.	Provide students with enhanced skills and abilities that empower them to continue learning and to engage effectively with the complexities of the 'outside' world. Assessment of students in terms of the acquisition of transformative skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) and the transformative impact they have post- graduation.	Emphasis on specification and assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning <i>and</i> the acquisition of transformative abilities.	Emphasis on organisational structure that encourages dialogue, team working and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent.
	Assured by: Value added performance indicators. (External examination) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Value added. Professional accreditation	Assured by: Participant feedback (Accreditation) (Assessment)	Assured by: Improvement audit

Figure 1: Dominant model of EQM

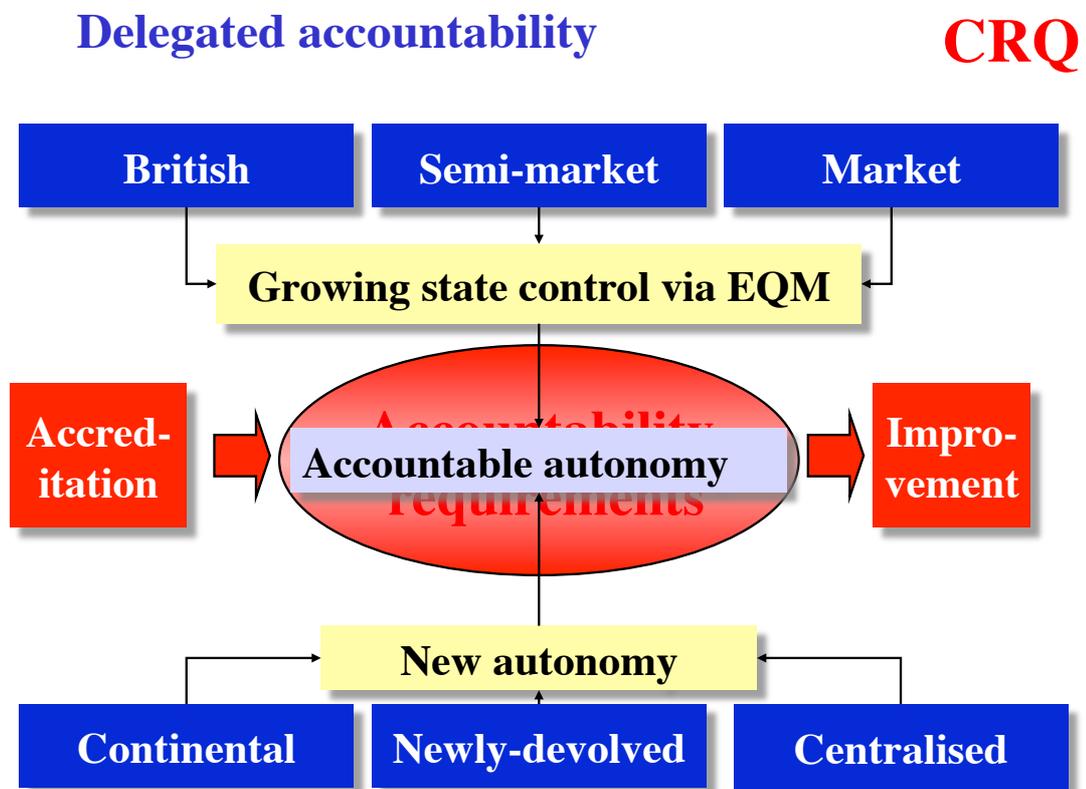


Figure 2: This figure is not available