

Quality assurance in higher education: some international trends

Lee Harvey

Introduction

Higher education is increasingly subject to quality evaluation by external bodies. However, external processes are not the primary mechanism by which quality in higher education is assured. Day-to-day quality assurance derives from internal academic processes. Therefore, it is important to keep the relationship with internal processes in mind important when analysing external evaluation. In general, the expectation is that external processes will augment internal procedures. However, this is not always the case and sometimes the conflict. There is an implicit assumption that the imposition of external processes will result in internal processes becoming more systematic, documented and transparent.

‘Evaluation’ is used here as an umbrella term for all forms of quality monitoring, assessment, audit, enhancement legitimation, endorsement or accreditation. Specific aims and purposes of quality evaluation will be explored below but, first, an outline of who the evaluators are.

Delegated accountability

External quality evaluation is a characteristics of nearly all types of higher education system. There are six broad types: the ‘British model’ of autonomous institutions also found throughout much of the Commonwealth; ‘market systems’ such as the USA and the Philippines; ‘semi-market’ systems such as Taiwan and Brazil; the ‘Continental model’ of ‘centralised-autonomy’ found in much of Western Europe including Italy, France and Austria; newly-devolved systems such as those in Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and Scandinavia and centralised systems such as China.

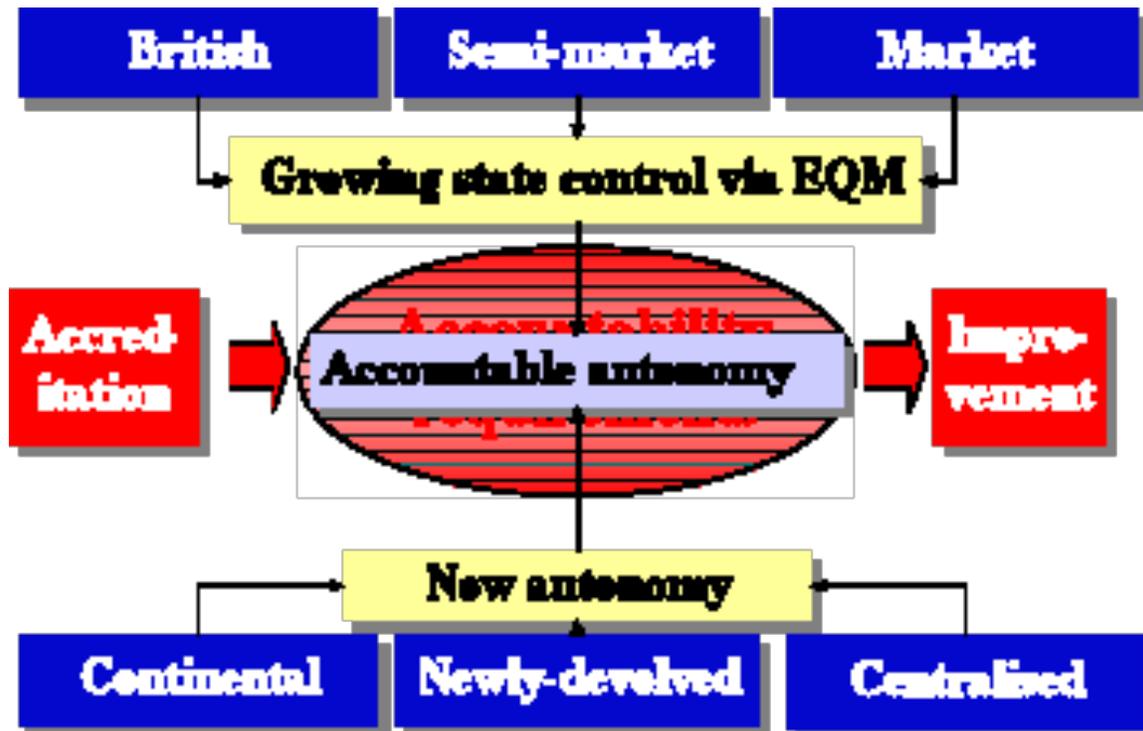
The development of most systems of external evaluation has been a result of an initial pragmatic response to government mandates. The resulting systems then adapt and respond to changing situations. However, within this fluid situation, some common themes emerge, which suggests a convergence to a dominant form of accountable autonomy (Harvey and Knight, 1996) (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). Where central control was, or continues to be, exerted over higher education, for example in China, Eastern Europe, South America and Scandinavia, there has been increasing delegated responsibility for quality but at the price of being required to be accountable and open to scrutiny.

Thus, 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.

Since the mid-1990s the basic convergence to delegated accountability has been augmented by two other trends. First, is the tendency for second-phase evaluations to focus on or emphasise improvement. In a few cases, as discussed below, countries such as Sweden and Finland started with a clear improvement focus. However, this was unusual and the norm has been to prioritise accountability in the first phase. The second augmentation to the delegated accountability model is the current preoccupation with accreditation. This is driven by a growing internationalisation agenda.

Figure 1: Delegated accountability



Internationalisation

The rapidly-growing interest in international quality evaluation has come about because of the globalisation of higher education and the perceived need for international comparability, compatibility and transferability of qualifications thus enabling international student mobility. Rather more defensively, international evaluation is seen as a potential safeguard against the activities of new providers and various forms of 'borderless' higher education in an era of liberalisation of 'trade' in higher education. Given concerns about private and transnational higher education providers, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Global Forum on Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education will maintain a 'watching brief' on their activities as, according to Sir John Daniel the group's assistant director for education 'national governments can no longer be the sole determinants of the public good' (Jen, 2001).

As the number and type of institutions of higher education around the world expands, the need for students, institutions, employers, governments and others for reliable information about the quality of institutions and programmes in higher education worldwide becomes increasingly important (IAUP, 2001). In the US, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is 'initiating a CHEA "first" — a one-day seminar on international accreditation and quality assurance' (Eaton, 2001).

There are various possible ways that international accreditation could occur. One approach is for *mutual recognition* between national agencies, which was at the root of developments on the back of the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education and the 1999 Bologna Declaration in Europe. Article 11 of the Declaration states that quality is a multi-dimensional concept and must include specific institutional, national and regional conditions. Individual nations' approach to quality assurance must be respected and that any European dimension in accreditation arrangements must rest on national systems. Nonetheless, it seems that current discussions relating to mutual recognition are less about mutual trust of other national accreditors as about establishing internationally recognised criteria with an implicit convergence agenda.

Second, *international* agencies could be established doing much the same that national agencies do, that is, organisations that lie outside national systems and would directly accredit or assure institutions or, more likely, programmes. These organisations might be based on international communities such as MERCOSUL or the European Union or be private organisations or consortia with an international reach, membership or credibility. Organisations such as European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), ABET and the European Consortium of Public Administration programmes (EAPAA) offer or are intending to offer a form of voluntary international accreditation of institutions, faculties and programmes (often for international professional recognition) according to certain threshold levels. The criteria are defined by the accrediting agency or consortia. However, such accreditation may have more in common with membership of a club and thus enhance an institution's reputation, than it does to provide any international assurance of quality.

UNESCO has indicated plans to set up an international quality assurance body that might draw on a range of partners including national accrediting bodies and intergovernmental partners such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the European Commission. The intention would be to set up a general code of conduct for institutes of higher learning, both public and private. However, UNESCO had no intention of this body acting as an accrediting agency, although it would like to see a growth in the number of internationally recognised degrees (Jen, 2001).

The logistics of peer review and language and cultural compatibility would be more complex for international than national organisations. There are also language and cultural problems when using international peers. There are considerable differences in the extent to which different discipline areas consider international peer-review to be objective and reliable. Some recent research suggested that physicist considered international peer-review as an objective and reliable method of quality assessment, whereas sociologists thought this not feasible (Kekale, & Lehtikoinen, 2000). Where international agencies have worked successfully, such as CRE audits, the institutions have taken part voluntarily and the process has had a clear improvement rather than accountability function. Any potential European-wide accreditation agency, is, for example, something considered likely to be overly bureaucratic, too closely specified and costly and thus unwelcome (Harvey, 2002). Although there has been 'opinion in favour of more binding arrangements inside the European Union, there are no official hints at an all-European accreditation régime' (Haakstad, 2001, p. 79).

A third approach would be to create *supranational* agencies. The European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies might, for example, undertake evaluations of the practices and process of national agencies with a view to providing some type of European accreditation of national agencies. It has been argued that the international credibility of the quality processes in most European countries is not very high and would be enhanced or better understood internationally if 'kite-marked' by a supranational European agency (Campbell & van der Wende, 2000).

What exactly will be accredited by any supranational evaluation is unclear but there seems a strong likelihood that it will increase pressure on member countries to develop broadly similar practices to qualify for a 'quality label'. Indeed Sursock (2000) has argued that a European supranational 'accreditation system' ought to 'allow convergence while respecting national diversity; preserve diversity of higher education institutions and programmes; [maintain] appropriate balance between institutional autonomy and legitimate accountability demands; be flexible to adapt to continuous international volatility; add value to current quality assurance systems' (quoted in Westerheijden, 2001, p. 71).

The notion of a quality label lies beneath the current discussions between the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP), the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and UNESCO. IAUP has grown increasingly bullish in its interest in international quality assurance. Since its meeting on 15 February 2000 in Bangkok, the Commission on Global Accreditation of

IAUP (established in July 1999) has shifted ground. It initially encouraged 'mutual recognition' and assisting members to 'establish groups of institutions which can help accredit each other's educational programmes based on quality assurance and with defining accreditation standards' (Van Damme, 2000, p.1). Its current position (December 2001) is to propose a supranational quality assurance agency.

The Commission on Global Accreditation proposed a worldwide quality label for quality assurance and accreditation agencies (IAUP, 2001). A consortium based on IAUP, INQAAHE and UNESCO would operate the label. The intention is that the public, all over the world, would be assured that the local quality assurance agency that reviewed the institution or programme is reputable and thorough. In practice this would mean the agency meets standards for trustworthy quality assurance, such as a clear commitment to develop academic quality in the institutions and programmes evaluated by it, fair and appropriate quality assessment procedures, and well-developed and publicly-available protocols or manuals that describe, in a transparent way, the procedures and standards used in quality assessment processes.

The system, it is argued, is intended to promote mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies in different countries. The process also aims to advance mobility of students, academics and graduates as well as aid credit-transfer and the recognition of qualifications, support co-operation between programmes and joint development of curricula. Ultimately the proposed system is intended to enhance the quality of higher education institutions and programmes worldwide stimulating providers to 'strive for the highest academic quality' (IAUP, 2001). The initial eligibility and evaluation criteria for the world quality label, outlined below, have, though, caused some concern amongst members of INQAAHE. ¹ Basic characteristics of eligibility are:

- 'Activities of the agency concern external quality assurance or accreditation.....
- The quality assurance or accreditation agency addresses primarily the educational function of HE institutions.
- Activities of the agency can be defined as quality evaluation, review, audit, assessment or accreditation....
- Those activities are executed on a regular basis and in a systematic way.
- The range of institutions evaluated or accredited by the agency can be both public and private, national and transnational, confined to one discipline or covering many disciplines.
- There is evidence of reliance on the agency by the academic community (including students), by employers, by government, or by others.
- The agency must have a minimum of two years' experience in the field of external quality assurance or accreditation in order to obtain the world quality label....' (IAUP, 2001)

It is not the intention of the quality label 'to impose a specific methodological approach or specific quality standards' but the proposal goes on to say that 'external assessment by the agency should be based on a combination of self-evaluation and peer review'. ² The views of international delegates at *The End of Quality?* seminar in Birmingham (Harvey, 2002) cast doubt on the efficacy and acceptability of this dominant methodology. The

dominant approach of self assessment (supported by statistical indicators), peer review and publication has been critiqued elsewhere, not least because of the performance, game-playing and 'double bookkeeping'³ that accompany the methodology (Barrow, 1999; Harvey, 1998; 2002).⁴ Furthermore, the convergence that appears to lie behind such proposals leads to cultural blindness perhaps reflecting the imperialistic nature of quality evaluation (Lemaitre, 2001).

The current obsession with international accreditation is losing sight of the quality assurance process. It is also ascribing far too much to the accreditation process. Accreditation is about formal recognition and a variety of activities are used, more often than not heavily oriented towards inputs. Accreditation, though, is not distinct from quality assurance processes. No reputable agency accredits an institution or programme unless it is convinced that the institution is able to *continue* to deliver the criteria used in achieving the accreditation. Where accreditation requires evidence beyond essentially paper-based applications for example, where sophisticated explorations of quality systems or evaluations of the learning process or standards of outcomes are undertaken by inspectors, visiting panels or peer groups then there is clear cross-over into the realms of audit, assessment and standards monitoring. To some extent, then, accreditation is being misleadingly used as a catch-all term. This is partly born out of the sudden re-emergence of the view that US-style accreditation as somehow an appropriate model for other parts of the world. There is a misleading mythologizing of the American system of accreditation as a viable means for ensuring mutual recognition of quality. This notion is resisted, particularly in parts of Europe that also see it trailing 'unwelcome' American culture behind it. More considered reaction suggests that the US system has many deficiencies⁵ and, ironically, the resurgence of interest in US accreditation comes at a time when some agencies in the US are exploring alternative 'reaccreditation' procedures, akin to audit, that are more worthwhile for well-established participant institutions (Spanghel, 2001).

Furthermore, one has to ask whether there is a growing tendency to unnecessarily initially accredit or reaccredit programmes and is this indicative of a problem of trust and overcontrol of the sector. This concern becomes particularly acute in the wake of the Bologna Declaration where the new bachelors-masters structure is being developed. Instead of allowing institutions autonomy to rigorously internally validate these new programmes (perhaps using external advisors to ensure comparability) and then formally accrediting them for funding purposes subject to the existing national quality assurance processes, governments are maintaining control by requiring formal accreditation of these restructured programmes outside the existing assurance processes. In short, internationalisation is having an affect on national procedures. The situation in Germany and the Netherlands provide examples.

Recent changes in Germany, following the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, has enabled the introduction of bachelor's and master's programmes as an alternative to traditional German qualifications. Agencies that wish to undertake initial accreditation of such programmes can be set up freely but need to be recognised by newly-established federal Accreditation Council (Akkreditierungsrat, 1999; Berner & Richter, 2001). The criteria

for the agencies include being independent, not-for-profit, and to cover more than one higher education institution and more than one type of programme. They should have national and international expertise and criteria and standards should reflect the agency's competence. The Accreditation Council also sets reporting requirements.

In the Netherlands, the introduction of bachelors' and masters' is also being linked to a national accreditation organisation that is likely to 'kite-mark' a range of potential evaluation agencies. The big difference with Germany is that the Netherlands has more than a decade of well-established national quality assurance processes, while Germany has little in the way of federal or Lande-based quality assurance agencies. Linking accreditation to established quality assurance is problematic in a period of structural upheaval (this is discussed further below). Although the Bologna Declaration does not mention how transparency is to be achieved, Westerheijden (2001, p. 68) argues that many Western European countries, the Netherlands included, have interpreted this as introducing programme accreditation instead of, or on top of, existing external quality assurance arrangements. 'In policy developments in Western Europe, the *communis opinio* seems to be that the new bachelor's and master's degrees need to be safeguarded through programme accreditation'.

Bureaucracy, legitimacy and burden

It does not seem to matter which approach or approaches to external quality evaluation are taken, academic and institutional managers complain about the bureaucracy, the legitimacy and the burden of external processes. Delegates at *The End of Quality?* seminar, from countries with existing systems, agreed that monitoring processes, however benign, imposed an unnecessary burden and that any form of external quality monitoring would involve some level of 'bureaucracy' (Harvey, 2002).

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy refers to both the organisation of the external monitoring process and the process by which such monitoring takes place. The key issue is not so much the existence of a bureaucracy or of bureaucratic processes but the *nature* of the bureaucracy and its processes. By this, delegates were not concerned so much by the regulatory or statutory power, auspices or independence of quality evaluation bureaucracies, rather they were concerned that whatever the bureaucracy's characteristics it should, primarily, serve the stakeholders in higher education. It was proposed that quality-monitoring bureaucracies should be flexible and enabling rather than controlling. Higher education institutions have changed and evaluation bodies should also be prepared to adapt and be flexible.

The problem is that the bureaucracies become established and politicians are afraid of losing face if agencies are dissolved as this would appear to constitute an admission of failure. External quality evaluation risks becoming 'standardised', which may lead to excessive bureaucratisation and inflexibility. Without periodic change, delegates argued, 'there is the danger of ending up with a British-style, QAA-type, system: a rolling

‘juggernaut’, that is not sure what it is looking for, but which ensures compliance and minimises innovation and risk-taking’ (Harvey 2002).

As noted above, there is a tendency for quality bureaucracies to grow to take on more activities and this is, for example, a particular concern in those European countries shifting to a bachelor-masters structure. If the new agency in Norway, for example, is both an auditing agency (accrediting institutions on the basis of a review of quality processes in place) and is intended to directly accredit all the new graduate studies that are developed in the Norwegian system, then it will have a significant and rising workload. If the aim is to have a small but potent bureaucracy then it might be better expending energy planning required masters provision and delegate authority to put them in place, by providing clear guidelines, which for example, might invite institutions to ensure they include overseas external advisers in the framing of new masters’ programmes.

Legitimacy

Similarly, the legitimacy of external quality evaluation is important and that tends to depend on the extent it is supported by academics, which itself is a function of how collaborative the process is. Where the evaluation is seen as something being ‘done to’ an institution or department there is a legitimisation crisis. Legitimacy is less of an issue where there is dialogue and engagement with a view to making use of the process to help institutions, departments and individuals develop and improve their outputs (Outputs include enabling student learning, knowledge through research or community involvement.) Interactive debriefing, such as the New Zealand system, rather than just summary reports is likely to increase legitimacy

It was noted by delegates to *The End of Quality?* that universities have very different attitudes to funding of research linked to external assessment compared with funding linked to evaluation of teaching. Research assessment is often perceived as somehow more legitimate. One explanation might be the greater degree of difficulty (real or perceived) associated with measurement of teaching. However, many delegates were of the view that evaluation of teaching is a critically important objective of quality monitoring. Whether this is best achieved through internal processes, peer visits or professional inspection was a moot point.

In the end, to be legitimate, the purpose and goals of any external (or internal-external) monitoring need to be clear, Furthermore, external agencies should not adopt a policing role. Rather external processes should be supportive, aiding improvement in institutions and the system as a whole. In addition, external evaluation should not displace legitimate internal-external processes such as external examining and departmental reviews, which tend to have credibility (Harvey, 2002).

Burden

External monitoring is burdensome: but some approaches are clearly more burdensome than others. The more controlling and intrusive the evaluation, the more objectives an evaluation has, or the more evidence that is needed the greater the burden it is likely to impose on the sector. Thus any evaluation that attempts to assess fairly will tend to be comprehensive, exhaustive and thus burdensome. In the UK, the combined system of subject review, institutional quality audit, research assessment, professional accreditation and external examining, supported by a standards infrastructure consisting of codes of practice, subject benchmarks, programme specifications, qualifications framework and student profiles was very burdensome indeed. This apparently exhaustive package is a heavy price to pay (for the government and for the institutions) for the tracing of a tiny number of sub-standard programmes, whose shortcomings might possibly be found out through simpler control procedures (Underwood, 1998).

If the evaluation is not trusted, or is not considered as helpful, or runs contrary to the academic culture, or carries with it financial or reputational consequences it will generally be perceived to be more burdensome than perhaps it is. When one is forced into doing a job one considers irrelevant, unnecessary, unacceptable or unpalatable then it will be perceived as a chore. More importantly, those involved will not engage with the process and it is likely to be counterproductive at worst or result in short-term compliance at best.

At the *End of Quality?* seminar, concern was expressed by those countries with newly developing systems, such as South Africa and Australia, that the past experience of other countries indicates that institutions and academics would be faced by a heavy burden of extra work. It was also suggested that, in some small countries, the process is excessive. For example, Denmark is a small homogenous society and higher education does not need heavy accountability machinery.

Delegates also thought that the main burden was the time taken in preparing for monitoring events. In particular, the requirement to prepare specific event-related documentation is burdensome. 'Rather than ask for specific documents, agencies should evaluate on the basis of what institutions already produce. If the evaluation, for example, reveals that the institution does not provide adequate material to students about assessment criteria, then this should be noted for future action' (Harvey, 2002). Preparing for events was criticised because it diverted scarce resources from the key tasks of higher education: viz., the improvement of the learning and experience for students and the development of research and scholarship.

However, the new emphasis on accreditation, linked to restructuring, might lead to over-burdensome and cumbersome processes as 'accreditation' is tacked onto other quality processes such as audit.

Will accreditation systems be inflated so as to invade and dominate the domain of evaluations and cause these to refer more to fixed standards? ... a case in point... is the recent development in Sweden, where a programme of comprehensive, cyclical subject reviews is now being introduced, with

accreditation control as one of its explicit aims. Will more comprehensive systems of accreditation control really assure and enhance educational quality, and if so, at what cost? (Haakstad, 2001)

Impact of evaluation

External quality monitoring of higher education has been in existence for over a decade and the number of countries undertaking it continues to grow. Members of INQAAHE come from over 70 countries. There is a lot of experience but relatively little evaluation of the evaluators. Evaluation of evaluators appears to be a rather *ad hoc* process. Unlike the published reports of the evaluators, research reports that evaluate evaluators are much less easy to locate. In an analysis for the INQAAHE Conference (Harvey, 1999), three types of evaluation of evaluation systems emerged. Type-1, opinionated or ‘theoretical’ analyses that tend to ‘predict’ the likely affects of the introduction of, or change in, evaluation systems (Wilson, 1996). Type-2 analyses are based on, often-limited available evidence, much of it anecdotal: for example, the benefits attributed to self-evaluation is based on accumulations of such anecdotal evidence (Harvey, 1998). Type-3 analyses are based on systematic data collection.

The following review of impact draws on opinion, anecdote and some Type-3 studies⁶. At *The End of Quality?* seminar there was considerable doubt expressed about the efficiency of most external quality evaluation.

Apart from the excessive cost to the exchequer of external systems, the internal costs of monitoring, in some countries, are enormous and in no way reflect the value gained from the process. Not only does external quality monitoring fail, in many systems, to engage with the internal improvement, its periodic and dramaturgical manifestations do not readily help inform change management in institutions. (Harvey, 2002)

Furthermore, some delegates thought that external evaluations actually inhibit innovation because of the application of conservative or rigid evaluation criteria. Impact leads to uniformity: Westerheijden (2001, p. 70), for example, argues that national accreditation arrangements work towards national uniformity rather than diversity.

any single accreditation procedure checks conformity with a single set of criteria, usually defined in terms of inputs and curriculum. Accordingly, all programmes (in a certain field of knowledge) within the country tend to conform to this set of criteria, that is, they tend to converge. In a number of cases, such equality is a consequence of intended equivalence, intended to ensure that degrees have the same meaning all over the country.

In this respect, and others, quality processes were seen by *The End of Quality?* delegates as a vehicle for the introduction and implementation of government policy.

More damaging than lack of innovation and conformity, was the view that most external evaluation led to only temporary adjustments rather than lasting improvement. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that the initial impact fades away quickly, especially if there is no significant connection between internal and external processes. External monitoring must interact with internal quality systems: the real benefits, it was argued, are products of the external-internal dialogue.

Thus, the issue was how to embed changes that may result from quality monitoring processes. Such embedding, it was generally acknowledged, involved changes in culture and these do not occur quickly. Nor do they occur if the participants (students, staff, institutional leaders) are not committed to them. It was noted that there is a ‘paranoia shift’ amongst staff in higher education institutions: from a fear of who will be targeted by evaluation processes to cynicism that nothing will happen anyway.

Delegates suggested that if quality monitoring is seen as an ‘event’ rather than a ‘process’ there is little likelihood of the event making much long-term impact. Rather, it is likely to lead to performance and game playing. The more the process is one of complying with external requirements the less the lasting internal benefits. This whole process is exacerbated by links to funding, which drives institutions to conceal weaknesses rather than engage in self-evaluation and improvement.

Perhaps the severest criticism raised by delegates was that external evaluations had no impact on programme quality or student learning (Harvey, 2002). There is no evidence of clear impact on learning and, indeed, available research suggests that other factors entirely outweigh the impact of external quality monitoring on student learning (Horsburgh, 1998). The structure and organisation of external quality monitoring is not compatible with empowering staff and students to enhance the learning situation.

Horsburgh’s (1998) longitudinal study of the role and importance of external processes is a rare study that address the impact on the student experience, specifically changes to the transformative learning experiences of students. Horsburgh starts by identifying the elements needed for transformation and constructs a framework that structures her observations, interviews and wide-ranging document reviews rather than start from the external processes and explore whether changes recommended have been put in place. Eight key factors are shown to have a significant impact on change management on the two degree programmes she analysed in depth. These are:

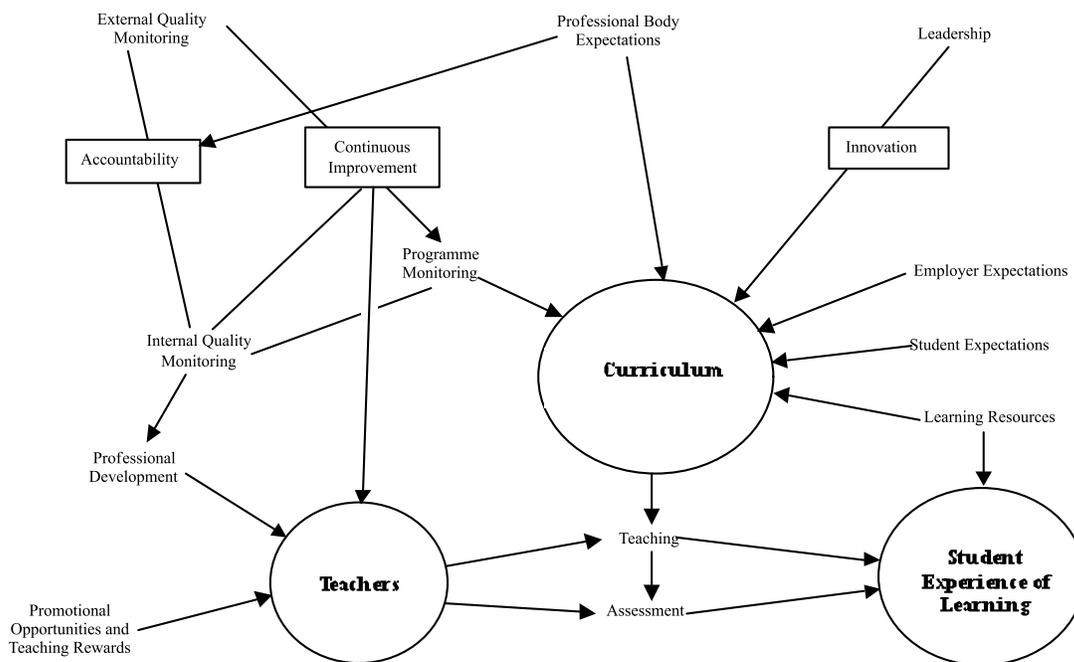
- the curriculum intent and philosophy, along with the programme-development team who determine what this will be;
- leadership;
- members of external approval panels, external monitors of programmes and a professional body;
- the teaching staff and how they teach and assess students;
- the teaching staff and the environment in which they teach;
- programme-specific internal quality monitoring, both formal and informal;
- resource issues;
- student expectations.

Horsburgh mapped the dialectical interrelationship between the factors that impact on degree programmes and the student experience of learning (Figure 2). This is not in any way intended as a causal model but as a map of the complexity of the processes and as indicative of the wider context and state of flux in higher education. She suggests that there are far more important factors impacting on innovation in learning than external quality monitoring.

Horsburgh (1999, p. 23) concludes that, overall, ‘the greatest impact on student learning was the curriculum, factors that influence the curriculum, and the teachers. The most direct impact on student learning was from teacher practices, how they help students learn and the assessment practices they employed’. On the other hand, in an institution that has comprehensive quality systems in place, which have been influenced by external requirements, ‘there was minimal impact of quality monitoring activities on actual learning and teaching practices’.

The factors impacting on the student experience of learning confirmed what many higher education commentators report, that for quality monitoring to have an impact on the effectiveness of higher education, the emphasis must be on the curriculum, learning and teaching. Quality monitoring must focus on more than systems, inputs and outputs, if effectiveness is to be enhanced. (Horsburgh, 1999, p. 23)

Figure 2: Factors impacting on the student experience of learning



Source: Horsburgh, 1999, p. 22

Baldwin's (1997) evaluation of the impact of the short-lived Australian evaluations in the 1990s on Monash university suggested that it focused attention on teaching and learning. The result has been an intensification of debate about effective learning and the use of student perspectives in the shaping of programmes of study. She suggested that, coincident to the development of external quality monitoring, there had been an improvement in the quality of attention given to teaching and learning at Monash. However, this may have been as much to do with the impact of new technology as to external quality monitoring. Furthermore, some of her colleagues were far from convinced that external quality monitoring represented an overall gain rather than loss as the costs of the process included excessive bureaucratisation, greatly increased administrative workload, a formalism that stifled creativity and individuality and an implicit lack of trust in academic staff.

Delegates at *The End of Quality?* were of the view that the nature and impact of quality monitoring may be different depending on whether the higher education system and quality assurance are at an early stage of development or well-established. There was a general feeling that, over time, external monitoring should become less frequent, less intrusive, give more trust to institutions and work more collaboratively. It was suggested that emphasis should be placed on interim internal monitoring, reports of which should go to the external agencies. There is a need for constant reflection and change in the procedures, the purposes and in the agencies themselves.

Published studies also suggest that evaluation can result, albeit perhaps inadvertently, in restrictive or conformist practices in higher education. McInnis and Marginson (1994) were commissioned by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) to undertake a study of the impact of the 1987 Pearce Committee evaluation of Australian law schools. Their impact study clearly revealed that the Pearce Report, which followed the evaluation, had a considerable impact especially on those institutions where it had highlighted weaknesses. Its emphasis on library standards, for example, influenced law library developments and its advocacy of small-group teaching led to shifts in teaching practice (at least until deteriorating staff:student ratios undermined it). However, its main impact was the encouragement of a climate of debate, discussion, critical thinking, self-evaluation and continuous improvement. On the other hand, the report was almost counterproductive in some areas, not least its attempt to restrict Masters courses, its suggestion that one school might close, and its failure to grasp the significance of diversity. McInnis and Marginson note, however, that the impact of the Committee was no greater than concurrent policy changes in Australian higher education.

Similarly, Lee and Harley (1998) studied the impact of the British Research Assessment Exercise on the discipline of economics. They conclude that the RAE has led to the reinforcement of the primacy of 'mainstream' economics to the detriment of alternative approaches. This has happened because the RAE process has been appropriated by the 'mainstream' economics establishment, exemplified by the Royal Economic Society (RES). The RES's power came from its control of the 'reputational' system that is central

to the organisation of academic work. Although the RAE could have undermined the control of RES, it had, on the contrary, reinforced it.

By virtue of their already dominant position, the leadership of the RES was able to capture the process by which assessors were appointed to the economics panel. In particular, the Society actively supported the establishment of the Conference of Heads of University Departments of Economics (CHUDE) in 1987, whose most important activity was the selection of RES-acceptable candidates for the economics panels.

Consequently, the assessors appointed to the 1989, 1992 and 1996 panels were overwhelmingly mainstream economists holding significant positions within RES, or on the editorial board of *The Economic Journal* or a member of the CHUDE Standing Committee. The impact was that this 'rigged jury', whose 'paradigm-bound view' was that 'the quality of non-mainstream research is largely inferior to mainstream research' rewarded departments who did mainstream research and published in core mainstream journals (Lee & Harley, 1998, p. 198).

The result of this financial intervention has 'driven British economic departments to discriminate against non-mainstream research and the hiring of non-mainstream economists as well as to restrict if not eliminate the teaching of non-mainstream economics to students' (Lee & Harley, 1998, pp. 198-99). Thus, for example, Marxist economists on retirement are not replaced and courses of Marxist political economy are dropped.⁷ For Lee and Harley, the message is clear, improve ratings and hence funding by hiring mainstream economists. The impact is the loss of non-mainstream research and teaching. A kind of 'academic cleansing'.

Such research suggests that more studies that address the micro-politics of quality evaluation are needed. These impact analyses, thus, move us clearly into the realms of the 'politics of quality'. It is not enough to undertake effectiveness or impact research that attempts to transcend the political dimension. This is a view endorsed by the British, Swedish and Norwegian *International Study of Higher Education Reforms* research programme, which has as its overall aim to:

examine how higher education reforms have been received and implemented or counteracted by academic faculty and academic leaders; and to analyse how reform policies and structural changes have affected working lives, values, identities and productivity of academics in higher education institutions. (Bauer & Henkel, 1997, p. 1)

The overall picture, based on international seminar contributions, anecdote and published research, does not suggest that external evaluation has been particularly successful. Outcomes are often, it seems, temporary and not embedded in academic or organisational culture. Evaluations rarely engage directly with learning, let alone have any direct impact on it.

There has, of course, been considerable change in the higher education over the last decade but, it would appear, this has been driven by factors other than quality evaluation. Technological changes, massification, pressure for closer links to employment, general reduction in funding per head and internationalisation have been far more significant. Student learning is mostly affected by curriculum, organisation and technological change but this is itself more directly affected by professional bodies, teacher development and integrating new forms of communication and flexible course structure, which in turn are more likely to be market driven than initiated as a result of quality assurance. In effect, it seems that quality assurance is bringing up the rear, checking on changes rather than being a major factor in change.

Berit Askling, for example, explored the impact of the Swedish National Agency on Linköping University. She suggested that the Agency acted as a catalyst, rather than having a direct impact. That 'in a soft and supportive way it has... encouraged the institutions not to just establish routines for a management of quality but for elaborating infrastructures for quality enhancement' (Askling, 1997, p. 25). However, similar to Baldwin, she points out that although external quality monitoring has been a catalyst, 'it is itself a response to changes that are exerting great direct and indirect impact on institutions' (Askling, 1997, p. 25).

Copenhagen Business School is an example of an institution that has changed dramatically in a decade from a didactic teaching institution to a learning-oriented university. There has been a significant cultural change but this has been dependent on physical changes including new buildings and new technology, changes to course organisation linked to changing student numbers and finance, committed and secure senior management with vision and energy to drive internal changes, and a new generation of innovative staff. Evaluation has had some role in this but in rather complex ways. The national programme assessment undertaken by the Danish Evaluation Institute provided the impetus for a reconsideration of a stagnating programme but successive changes have been driven by committed staff and students via a democratic study board. In the scheme of things, though, the CRE audit and its follow up, entered into voluntarily by the institution in order to learn, have been a far more significant factor in the long-term changes. The institution continues to learn by participating in external evaluations, such as EQUIS, and a European benchmarking project. In the case of CBS, mirroring Horsburgh's (1999) analysis, evaluation is several steps removed from the real drivers of change, especially in the development of the university as a learning community.

Of course, the far-from-exhaustive evidence on impact, above, could be construed as biased or misleading. More to the point, it could be construed as naïve to assume that quality evaluation is intending to lead to change and improvement. After all, as has been suggested, evaluation primarily has an accountability function in most countries. Value for money may be the principal driver and it has been suggested that quality evaluation simply legitimises and conceals deteriorating quality and standards (Harvey, 2002). However, opinion within all stakeholder groups is clearly divided on this point.

It might also be argued that accountability is a further obfuscation of the real purpose, which is control. Maybe delegated accountability is merely a surface appearance and the real accountability process is not information generation, value for money or retaining credibility but as a vehicle for enforcing compliance to policy requirements. As Middleton and Woodhouse (1995, p. 262) remarked: 'getting compliance is exactly what is wanted'. If compliance is the real purpose of quality monitoring then it does not matter much if the outcomes or improvement are long-term, just as long as they last as long as the policy has currency. Of course, exploring this rather more cynical view of quality evaluation would require research into the implementation process. Recent work by Newton (1999; 2000) has suggested that implementation of quality policy is heavily mediated and that quality evaluation has unforeseen results, sometimes that operate counter to policy intentions.⁸

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, a personal view on what an external evaluation process would look like. To begin with, start in the right place. The starting point is certainly not the evaluation methodology. Nor is it the auspices and composition of the evaluating agency. The starting point is what is the current situation and what are its problems or shortcomings. On the basis of this identify the needs, if any, of an external evaluation process. Radically, be explicit about the politics of evaluation, so that the purpose of any evaluation is transparent.

Having established a purpose, examine how these external purposes relate to existing internal processes. Internal processes are vital to ensure the continued standard of qualification and the ongoing improvement of the education and research provided by the institution. Martin Trow (1995, p. 22) argues that 'internal reviews and assessments are more accurate and fruitful than those done by outsiders' a view reinforced by Bente Kristensen in her view of the Danish system. She notes that, while there can be a fruitful synergy between external and internal processes, external monitoring can never stand alone and 'will never be able to replace valuable internal quality monitoring' (Kristensen, 1997, p. 91).

Before taking the external evaluation process any further, establish what the internal procedures are. Ensure that the resulting external process will in principle mesh with the internal process. If the internal processes are not what they should be, make sure external processes encourage augmentation or change in internal processes and that the external processes will adapt to mesh with the revised internal process. In short, think of internal and external processes developing dynamically and in harmony.

Only at this stage start to define what external processes might specifically attempt to do and how they might do it. Bear in mind that 'successful' processes are characterised by dialogue, an improvement process, trust and transparency. Those that are costly, complex and burdensome are usually resented and can be counterproductive. There is considerable agreement (Karlsen & Stensaker, 1995; Saarinen, 1995) that the self-assessment process

is valuable (although the real outcome can be hidden from evaluators if there are accountability repercussions). performance indicators and peer reviews are less useful (except perhaps to the visiting peers who learn a lot although rarely sharing their insights).

So, counter to all accepted wisdom, do not use peer review, which is amateurish, but use professional inspectors, properly trained and recruited from the sector, on two- or three-year non-renewable secondments. To avoid set piece performances, inspectors would have a 'patch' and would drop in and undertake 'enabling inspections'. Rather than a single event, inspectors would act like critical friends and work with managers, teachers and student representative to explore and promote innovation and improvement through one-to-one dialogue, interviews, and observation. Self-reflection would be ongoing and the outcomes could be reported on an annual cycle by the inspectors and discussed with university staff and managers. The process would be more professional, cheaper, less burdensome, more meaningful and far more effective. It would be linked into and encourage the critical development of internal processes.⁹

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¹ Private correspondence between members of the INQAAHE Board.

² The proposal also specified, in some detail, other criteria, aspects of methodology, and protocols.

³ Double bookkeeping refers to the creation of two self-evaluations, a 'real' one for internal consumption and one, including required performance indicators, that is 'embellished' for external consumption. This embellishment appears to be irrespective of whether quality monitoring includes publication. This lack of openness is because universities fear revealing weaknesses or problems in self-evaluation because, in many countries, resources are used to reward strengths rather than combat weaknesses (Harvey, 2002).

⁴ The predominant approach has been criticised elsewhere and this paper does not rehearse the advantages and disadvantages of self-evaluation, statistical indicators, peer-review and publication. For a critical analysis see Harvey 1998.

⁵ Westerheijden (2001) notes 'The USA are not a 'shining example' of how things should be, because the lag between shifting demands on graduates and the accreditation criteria is one of the most often commented shortcomings of its accreditation practices.'

⁶ The reviews draw heavily on Harvey (1999).

⁷ The 19 departments that increased their ratings overwhelmingly hired mainstream economists (82 out of 89= 92%). Those who did not improve their lower-end ratings (1–3) hired relatively fewer mainstream economists (37 out of 54= 69%).

⁸ Pursuing this, however, is beyond the scope of the paper.

⁹ Appropriate internal process are suggested elsewhere (Harvey and Knight, 1996).