A history and critique of quality evaluation in the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – To provide a history of the emergence of quality systems from the mid-1980s. To show how quality became a primary policy concern in higher education policy. To map the development of quality processes and raise questions about dominant approaches and express concerns for the future.

Design/methodology/approach – Historical document analysis.

Findings – The problems in institutionalising quality are analysed and it is concluded that the British system of quality monitoring failed to engage with transformative learning and teaching.

Practical implications – As the UK developments guided many other countries into developing a system of quality, the UK history of the emergence and development of quality processes 1985-2005 is of interest to international readers. It identifies both good practice and what to avoid.

Originality/value – The historical analysis reveals how quality evaluations were guided as much by political pragmatism as rational evaluation.

Keywords Quality, Higher education, Educational policy, United Kingdom

Paper type General review

Introduction

The UK has had several processes for monitoring the quality of higher education. These include the external examiner system, professional accreditation of programmes, inspection of provision, quality audit of institutional processes, assessment of programmes, and research assessment. The first three predate the relatively recent concern with quality assessment and assurance. Indeed, quality audit of institutions was designed initially to ensure the inspectorial system, in place in polytechnics prior to 1992, was not introduced in the unified university system. Inspection now only takes place in teacher training departments, and is modelled on the approach current in the British compulsory school system.

The long-running external examiner system has been the mainstay of standards in the ever-expanding university system in the UK. There has been a concern in some official quarters that the external examiner system is insufficiently rigorous or independent given that externals are appointed and paid by the institution. However, it remains to this day (along with professional body accreditation in some areas) as the most credible and useful form of external quality monitoring, despite the additional pressures faced by externals in a flexible semesterised and modularised system.

Professional education and training is an important aspect of post-compulsory educational provision in Britain. A significant proportion of higher education provision is linked, in one way or another, to professional education and training. Over 100 professional or regulatory bodies (PRBs) are involved in monitoring course provision in UK universities either directly or via delegated responsibility.

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However, despite these processes, there was a growing quality movement that resulted in the introduction of more formal systems outside the control of the universities and professional bodies. This was on the back of government ideology in the 1980s that set out to bring market forces to bear on all aspects of economic, social, and cultural life in Britain and to attempt to privatise as much public service as possible. Accountability was the watchword under the banner of “efficiency and effectiveness”. Higher education was subject to this as much as any other sector and, indeed, academia was regarded with suspicion by the conservative government.

The evolution of additional formal external quality evaluations processes was partly the result of government wanting higher education to be more responsive, including:

- making higher education more relevant to social and economic needs;
- widening access to higher education;
- expanding numbers, usually in the face of decreasing unit cost;
- ensuring comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons; and
- ensuring higher education is accountable for public money.

Latterly, two more reasons have been added to the list of legitimations of quality evaluations in higher education:

(1) ensuring students get value for money; and

(2) ensuring that institutions are able to cope with the increasing globalisation of higher education and the deregulation of the market.

The emergence of quality

The mid-1980s saw the first clear efficiency statement of intent relating to higher education. The Jarrett report (CVCP, 1985) recommended that universities, and the system as a whole, should work to clear objectives, develop performance indicators and achieve value for money. The same year, the Lindop (1985, p. X) report recommended that some public sector institutions should be able to award degrees in their own name and take full responsibility for their own standards. The report noted that “the external examining system is an important and currently under-exploited safeguard of academic standards” and argued that the “best safeguard of academic standards is not external validation or any other form of external control, but the growth of the teaching institution as a self-critical academic community”. This advice has been, de facto, ignored for the best part of 20 years. The report suggested that the “best safeguard of academic standards is not external validation or any other form of external control, but the growth of the teaching institution as a self-critical academic community”. It recommended that a wider range of validating arrangements should be in place, recognising the extent to which an institution was able to control its own standards. It suggested that the secretary of state should take power to designate some public sector institutions as able to award degrees in their own name and take full responsibility for their own standards.

Meanwhile, in the Green Paper of 1985, The Development of Higher Education into the 1990, the government indicated its concern that higher education should contribute more effectively to the improvement of the performance of the economy (DES, 1985).
The government also attached great importance to raising academic standards and paying continuing attention to the quality of teaching, a theme that has re-emerged in the 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003). Diversity of programmes of study was also endorsed "provided they are sufficiently rigorous". It was the 1985 Green Paper that also forewarned of selectivity in research funding, a process that the 2003 White Paper proposes should be taken further. The government also indicated that it attached great importance to raising academic standards and stressed the importance of paying continuing attention to the quality of teaching. Again, prefiguring employability performance indicators 15 years later, the Green Paper also suggested that "external judgements about quality can be attempted by comparing the success of students in obtaining jobs, their relative salaries, their reported performance in employment, and by reference to the international standing of our academic qualifications" in addition to comparative judgements by external agencies.

The Green Paper, though, stressed that the primary responsibility for preserving and enhancing quality rested with each institution: a position that all subsequent quality rhetoric has repeated. However, in the interests of accountability, it suggested that the universities needed to be more explicit and transparent in specifying systems for monitoring and controlling quality. Despite the inhospitable stance of the government towards the public sector, there were still reservations in government about taking on the universities, which were highly autonomous, unlike the polytechnics of the day, which were under local authority control.

The White Paper of 1987 was emphatic that higher education should take greater account of the country's need for highly qualified workers and proposed to increase the participation rate of the 18-25 cohort to 18 per cent (DES, 1987). Although welcoming the Reynolds report on university standards (CVCP, 1986), the White Paper stated that universities "should do more to reassure the public about the ways in which they control standards". It indicated that academic standards and the quality of teaching in higher education should be judged primarily on the basis of students' achievements. In addition, it proposed performance indicators to measure efficiency and reconfirmed a commitment to selectivity in the funding of research. It also indicated that polytechnics and some large institutions of higher education would become corporate bodies under contract to a new funding body (to become the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC)); an intention legislated in the Education Reform Act of 1988. The White Paper indicated that efficiency was to be increased by improvements in institutional management: changes in the management of the system and the development and use of performance indicators. Furthermore, "to clarify responsibilities, improve financial accountability and increase effectiveness" the UGC would be replaced with a new funding body (to become the Universities Funding Council (UFC)).

On 1st November of that year, the Secretary of State for Education (1988) sent a circular letter to the chairman of the newly-established PCFC confirming the government's commitment to the achievement of greater efficiency within institutions. It established new arrangements for funding the polytechnics and colleges' sector and the universities' sector. The secretary of state recommended that PCFC should also develop indicators of both the quality and quantity of institutions' teaching in relation to funding. A flurry of activity on performance indicators had preceded the letter and further activity followed (CVCP/UGC, 1987a, b, 1988, 1989, 1990; PCFC, 1990b).
However, despite the focus of attention on performance indicators, they did not gain a prominent place in UK quality evaluation processes.

In 1989, following consultation, the recurrent funding allocation methodology for the non-university higher education sector was outlined (PCFC, 1989). The allocations would consist of two elements: core funding based on a percentage of the previous year's allocation (95 per cent in the first year) and a premium for programmes of "outstanding quality" that came in the shape of extra student allocations with beneficial financing. The Council would rely mainly on her majesty's inspectorate (along with the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)) to verify institutions' claims of quality programmes (PCFC, 1990c). In essence, the door to expansion had been opened and institutions were thrown into a competitive situation, with the inspectorate communicating judgements that would impact on funding. The competitive process and the link to quality judgements was further reinforced the following year when the core funding was reduced, quality premiums increased and low quality provision liable to withdrawal of funding should steps not be taken to remedy the situation (PCFC, 1990c).

Meanwhile, the new UFC undertook the first research selectivity exercise (UGC, 1988; UFC, 1989a, b), the outcomes of which were to inform research grants. However, there was little evident realisation in most universities that they, too, would soon have to compete for students in an expanded system.

Despite trying to head off more external control, the universities had to engage with external quality processes. The first line of defence was the establishment, in 1990, of an academic audit unit under the control of the sector. This came out of the Sutherland report (1989), which proposed that the CVCP set up a unit to monitor quality assurance in the universities. The resultant process, which remains at the heart of the current academic audit, did not evaluate or assess teaching quality nor academic or competence standards (CVCP AAU, 1991). It focused on the internal quality assurance systems in institutions and required documentation that, in essence, showed how internally- or externally-generated observation on quality resulted in subsequent action. In short, "audit trails" were followed to see if the institutions' quality process operated effectively in practice.

This differed from the PCFC Committee of enquiry report on teaching quality (PCFC, 1990a) that wanted greater clarity about what constituted teaching quality, as this informed funding allocations in the sector. The report identified five necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for "good" teaching and suggested what might count as evidence that these conditions existed and how they could be developed into indicators of the quality of teaching.

In 1991, the government issued a further White Paper, Higher Education: A New Framework (DES, 1991) in which further efficient expansion in student numbers to 33 per cent of the 18-25 cohort was flagged. The government's intention to maintain and enhance quality in higher education and to ensure that it was increasingly relevant to students' various needs during this period of expansion was stressed. The universities found the ground shifting under their feet as the government announced that, to achieve its objectives, it would eliminate the binary line and establish a single funding council for all higher education in England (with similar bodies for Scotland and Wales). The polytechnics were, by the 1990s, providing the same level of education for students, through to doctoral studies, as the universities. Although not undertaking
the same level of pure research as the universities, many polytechnics were engaged in applied research in some areas. The polytechnics had been under local authority control but were now funded centrally through the PCFC. From the government's point of view, the PCFC provided good value for money, which was needed if student numbers were to significantly expand.

The White Paper, taking note of the Bird Report (DES, 1990), indicated that degree-awarding powers would be granted to polytechnics and some other institutions. Contrary to the Bird report, which suggested that CNAA, in evolved mode, should periodically scrutinise all institutions' procedures for ensuring quality, the White Paper indicated that the CNAA would be wound up. New arrangements for quality assurance would be introduced including the scrutiny of institutional arrangements for quality assurance by an audit body governed by the institutions themselves, which evolved into the higher education quality council (CVCP/CDP/SCOP, 1992). However, units in each funding body would assess and advise on quality in all institutions. Drawing on the PCFC experience, the White Paper signalled that quality would be taken into account in the funding of institutions for teaching.

The Further and Higher Education Act (H.M. Government, 1992) obtained royal assent on 6 March 1992. With the passing of the Act, many of the institutions formerly validated by the CNAA were granted degree-awarding powers. The Act made provision for winding up the CNAA in September 1992 and its formal dissolution on 31 March 1993. Institutions without degree awarding powers would be required to approach a university for validation of degree-level courses. Provision was made for polytechnics to change their title to university, subject to Privy Council approval of the new name.

Separate Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales were established. The Act made it a legal requirement that funding councils should establish a committee to assess quality in higher education and the secretary of state reinforced this priority in a letter to the councils in June (DES, 1992). Assessors should have suitable academic backgrounds and expertise and command respect from peers. Although the minister would have preferred inspection, councils were free to determine the method of assessment, drawing on experience from the pilot assessments. Rather than consider the purpose and devise a suitable methodology, the minister insisted on a transparent accountability process, irrespective of the inevitable compliance, rather than improvement outcomes. The minister's letter gave a clear indication that an assessment visit should be part of the procedure and that reports of visits should be published. Furthermore, results of assessments should be in such a form that they can be used to inform funding allocations.

In the event, though, there was no direct link between quality and funding in England and Wales (although Scotland introduced a small premium for high quality rated programmes in the new combined sector). Indirect links, nonetheless occurred, as high quality programmes were permitted to recruit more students. The funding councils consulted on proposed teaching quality assessment methodologies (SHEFC, 1992; HEFCE, 1992). The Scottish process progressed relatively smoothly, being somewhat more structured from the outset than the approach developed and redeveloped in the much larger English sector. The Welsh approach followed the English one initially before developing separate elements. Space precludes separate analyses of the Welsh and Scottish methodologies. The basic constituents of the methodology initially proposed by HEFCE were performance indicators,
self-assessment by institutions and a visit from an assessment team. Assessments would be by discipline or subject areas. Not all institutions would be visited.

Criticism of the methodology during the consultation process led to a downgrading of the performance indicators and they were renamed statistical indicators. In effect, the British system has put far less emphasis on statistical indicators than some other countries, such as Australia and the US. Modifications to the HEFCE methodology saw universal subject assessment visits and changes in the rating systems.

Audit, assessment and research selectivity
By the early 1990s, “quality” had evolved from a marginal position to being the foremost concern in British higher education alongside funding issues and expansion. However, in 1992, there was a sudden volte-face on the part of the government. The autumn statement signalled a slow-down in the increase in higher education student numbers with a consequent reduction in funding for additional students. The effect of the slow-down in numbers was to place more emphasis on quality issues. By the mid-1990s, self-assessment, supporting documentation, peer review, and a public report were the mainstays of external quality monitoring processes, not only in the UK but in most other countries. British institutions were faced with five external processes: subject-based teaching quality assessment, institutional audit, the research assessment exercise, professional and regulatory body accreditation, and external examining.

Audits carried little sanction or prestige, neither money nor reputations were on the line and the language of audits was such that it was hard to spot harsh criticism of institutions. The old polytechnics, thanks to the CNAA heritage, were ahead of many of the universities in their quality procedures (despite the audit process being initially designed for the old universities). Some older universities contented themselves with going through the motions or, in some cases, bemoaning the quantity of documentation they had to produce, missing the point that this should already have been in existence (even if not in the format required by the auditors). However, when it came to teaching quality assessment, the old universities suddenly became the winners, despite their hitherto disdain of teaching in favour of research. Reputation and, indirectly, money was on the line. The quality assessment rules favoured traditional single-subject teaching and gave little encouragement for innovative learning facilitation: in short, they were written for the old universities and auditors, trained for a couple of days, went along with this. Despite the exclusion of the research profile from the criteria of teaching quality there was a surprisingly high correlation of research and teaching quality in the early rounds. To suggest good researchers were also good teachers is naive and suggests that evaluations followed reputation and, probably, traditional modes of teaching.

In 1997, the quality assurance agency for higher education (QAA) was established as a single external quality assurance agency. It took over the legislative responsibilities of the funding councils for subject-based teaching quality assessment as well as the audits that had previously been done by the HEQC, which was wound up. QAA also co-ordinated the UK-wide research assessment exercise. External examining and professional accreditation remained outside QAA control, although the organisation attempted to influence the development of the external examining process, through various proposals about training and accreditation of examiners as well as via a published code of conduct.
QAA is an independent body whose funding is in part from subscriptions from the higher education institutions as well as contracted services for the funding bodies. A board is responsible for the conduct of the agency and for its strategic direction. QAA’s (2003) purpose is to “safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education”. Nonetheless, the QAA repeats the mantra first voiced in the 1985 Green Paper, that each higher education institution is responsible for the quality and standards of its provision. Much more than either the HEQC or the quality committees, QAA emphasised standards, for example, the organisation notes that it will achieve its responsibilities: “by reviewing standards and quality, and providing reference points that help to define clear and explicit standards”.

Rather than alleviate concerns about quality bureaucracy and standards, the arrival of QAA soon resulted in increased complaints about accountability and compliance, and the erosion of autonomy and academic freedom. QAA has produced over 3,000 institutional reports on subject reviews and audits in addition to 60 subject overview reports. Not surprisingly, the real and opportunity costs of the operation have also been criticised, not least because of doubts about the cost-effectiveness of the outcomes. It seemed the reports had limited improvement impact at the learner-teacher interface nor did they appear to inform student choice. In addition, for several years, QAA was resented because of its evident desire to control the sector to an unprecedented degree: a legacy with which the current QAA, with a much less confrontational style and “lighter touch” is still encumbered.

In 1999, the validity of teaching quality assessments was thrown into considerable doubt by the situation at Thames Valley University (TVU). The university had received several satisfactory subject assessments and some that showed high quality provision. However, the staff unions at the university flagged up serious shortcomings and a subsequent QAA review of the institution as a whole revealed major problems (Baty, 1998). This called into question the QAA credibility, a situation not helped by the then chief executive engaging in a public personal exchange with the resigning vice-chancellor of TVU.

QAA became ever-more controlling in the sector despite it being mandated to find a way to reduce the burden of external quality evaluation. It took much discussion and the eventual resignation of the chief executive of QAA before a new combined audit and assessment methodology emerged. In an attempt to reverse the trend of the previous half decade, and in particular to get the high status research-intensive universities onside, QAA reaffirmed a commitment to academic values and institutional autonomy (QAA, 2003). The ending of subject reviews was part of this process.

In the meantime, QAA had become focused on standards and created another structure to underlay the quality processes. The standards infrastructure involved the development of benchmark statements for each subject area and a 12-part code of practice covering the quality of postgraduate research programmes, collaborative provision, students with disabilities, external examining, academic appeals and student complaints, assessment of students, programme approval, monitoring and review, career education, information and guidance, placement learning and student recruitment and admissions. It also created a qualifications framework: or to be precise two, one for Scotland and one for the rest of the UK as there was a failure to get agreement on a unified framework. The frameworks are designed to “promote a clearer
understanding of the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles, such as bachelors degree with honours, or masters degree” (QAA, 2003).

QAA also expected institutions to devise programme specifications for each course in accordance with a basic template. There was also an expectation that institutions would develop “progress files”, i.e. use a common format to identify student achievements and their reflection on them (over and above final classificatory grades) as well as enable students' personal and development planning. “The standards infrastructure provides a series of mechanisms by which to make explicit the standards already implicit in good academic practice. They offer a means by which standards can be articulated without being dominated by the internal values of the academic profession or the external values of outside constituencies” (Wright, 2001).

The current situation has seen the development of an amended audit process, that, broadly speaking includes, what is colloquially known as, “drill-down” into specific areas of concern, negotiated with the institution. Audits are intended to “ensure that institutions are providing higher education, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard; and exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner” (QAA, 2003).

In England and Northern Ireland, the first full programme of institutional audits began in February 2003 and is due to be completed by 2005. Thereafter a six-year cycle will be the norm. In addition to audit, institutions may, until 2005, also be reviewed through a developmental engagement or an academic review at subject level. Developmental engagements “allow institutions to test, in cooperation with us, the strength of their internal review procedures at discipline level (for example, all areas of engineering) or programme level (for example, BE in Electrical Engineering), and the robustness of the evidence they use in those procedures” (QAA, 2003). Academic review involves judgements about standards and learning quality within a subject area. It is also undertaken in further education colleges in England that provide higher education programmes. In addition, the QAA undertake the evaluation of teaching and learning within practice settings on NHS-funded healthcare programmes for the department of health.

In Wales, following a programme of developmental engagements in institutions in 2002, a new quality assurance and standards framework was implemented in 2003-2004. There is a new enhancement-led approach to managing quality and standards in Scottish higher education. A collaborative process, involving QAA, SHEFC, Universities Scotland and the Scottish institutions and student bodies resulted in enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), which commenced in 2003 and is based on a four-year cycle. ELIR focuses on the activities undertaken by each institution to continually improve the learning experience of students.

The 2003 White Paper The Future of Higher Education (DiES, 2003) took up the suggestion in the final report of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) and created what has been called the higher education academy as a merger of three existing organisations that hitherto aided the improvement of teaching; the institute for learning and teaching in higher education (ILT), the learning and teaching support network (LTSN), and the higher education staff development agency (HESDA). This looks as though it might underpin a shift towards a more enhancement-oriented approach to quality.
The problems and the future

Quality monitoring in the UK has been beset by overlapping and burdensome processes, competing notions of quality, a failure to engage learning and transformation, and a focus on accountability and compliance. This has been compounded by a lack of trust.

Government did not trust institutions to deliver appropriate academic standards while at the same time funding growth in such a way that encouraged other than a rigorous approach. The Thatcher government had it as a point of ideological principle to distrust the public sector in general and demand accountability. This ideological dogmatism was shored up by an attack on professionalism; the government distrusted the professions as bastions of non-accountability and, in so doing, attempted to undermine the legitimacy of the professional and regulatory body monitoring of the competence of professional courses. The distrust of the academy to deliver academic and competence standards was confounded by scepticism that institutions had sufficient customer focus (and provided appropriate service standards) or were adequately self-regulatory.

Instead of standing back and undertaking a totalistic review of quality issues, government and its agencies piled one initiative on another to create the “British quality juggernaut”, as it is referred to in parts of Europe. The various reviews of the quality processes were never designed to ask fundamental questions. The terms of reference made it impossible for the review team to do much more than identify which, of a set of alternatives that adjusted the specifics of a quality process, the sector preferred. In some cases, the review seemed little more than the opinions of the consultants but in no cases were the reviewers asked to go back to basics, take a holistic view, and examine whether the process under review was necessary at all.

External quality monitoring has become burdensome. There are multiple, overlapping layers of audit, assessment, accreditation, and external examining. However, that is only part of the burden; there is also the internal quality procedures that have to be adhered to including, for many academic staff, annual module or programme reports, reporting on research activity and publication, periodic programme revalidation, occasional departmental or faculty reviews, possibly internal teaching assessments, internal audits, facilitating and responding to student feedback and individual performance review or staff development procedures. The loss of the external teaching quality assessment (with its absorption into the new audit processes) is scant but welcome reward for many staff. Commenting on the QAA procedures in 2000 a social scientist commented:

> Everything has to be documented. All the marking has to be moderated with written reports. We spend a lot of time remarking other people’s stuff and all for the sake of a QAA visit. Every new initiative has to be seen in terms of how it will be seen at the next QAA visit. We have to keep attendance registers to show that we are trying to monitor non-attendance. All this adds to the administrative burden and creates systems that don’t make a hoot of difference to what the students get. No money comes in to improve things, its just pressure to make us do more bureaucracy. I haven’t seen any real changes since the last visit: it’s all cosmetic (Lecturer in social science, 28 September 2000, name withheld).

One of the problems is that there has been relatively little co-ordination between internal quality demands and external requirements. Even where external processes have only asked for existing documentation, the tendency, as the above quote suggests,
is to over-document existing practices as well as producing tailor-made documents to give a good impression.

More important than the burden of these processes *per se* is the feeling, again evident in the quote above, that it fails to serve an improvement function at the student-lecturer interface. The disengagement of quality from academics' primary concerns and the structuring of it as a game or exercise, in which they fleetingly take part, makes them feel it is a burdensome but pointless process. Furthermore, academics are intelligent and they perceive, whether correct or otherwise, that quality monitoring is weighed down by political agendas. They are particularly annoyed by the way that the structuring of procedures entraps them into endorsing the "quality" of a system where they clearly see the quality of provision declining. Again, a humanities lecturer commented:

We lost three staff recently and we all have to work more contact hours, which means that research has no chance. We have had to abandon some of the optional modules because there's no one to teach them. My availability to students is minimal -- we gave up essay tutorials some time back and there's no chance of getting the end of semester coursework back to students within three weeks if I mark it properly. And yet I can't tell QAA any of this. We have to pretend everything is fine even though we know it isn't (name withheld).

Quality evaluations involve game playing to cast the evaluated programme or institution in the best possible light. The peer visit element, in particular, has been criticised for its theatricality: the peers and the review subjects perform as required, whether or not they endorse the role expected of them, and the whole is a stage-managed set piece. The process is about compliance; there is very little opportunity for constructive dialogue to aid real improvement. The time spent by reviewers in an institution attempting to get beneath the surface gloss of self-evaluations, check the verisimilitude of statements and find the flaws that have been papered over, would probably be better spent in frank and open discussion aimed at enhancing the student experience.

External quality monitoring, despite the added workload of self-evaluations and peer reviews, was a useful exercise in focusing attention on purpose, operation and responsiveness. However, the perception is that quality processes do not have a sufficient improvement focus, nor do they provide practitioners with a sense of ownership of, and responsibility for, a process of continuous quality improvement. On the contrary, quality has become linked with control. The term "quality" is used far more frequently, in practice, as shorthand for the bureaucratic procedures than to refer to the concept of quality itself. It is thus, not the quality itself that is regarded as undesirable but the paraphernalia of quality monitoring that is seen as so intrusive.

At a time of declining resources it is important to get the balance right between the demands on academic staff to respond to external quality monitoring (including being involved as peer reviewers) and the need to invest in continuous improvement of the quality of the student experience, through staff development, innovation in teaching and learning, research and scholarship.

The evaluation processes in the UK have not all adopted the same notions of quality and standards. Apart from an initial confounding of "quality" (which is about process) and "standards" (which are about outcomes), the five principal quality evaluation processes have had different emphases.
Elsewhere, the suggestion has been made that quality is used in five ways in higher education debate: “excellence”, “perfection” (or consistency), “fitness for purpose”, “value for money” and “transformation” (Harvey and Green, 1993). In addition, there are four types of standards: academic standards of attainment of students, standards of competence to practice, service standards provided by the institution and organisational standards. Quality definitions intersect with these different notions of standards.

The long-standing external examiner system is concerned, in the last resort, with academic standards and, in some professional areas, has been recruited to monitor standards of competence. These are, de facto, judged against “gold standard” criteria of excellence although external examiner advice is couched in forms that are intended to ensure transformative quality. The research assessment exercise is also based on judgements of academic excellence. Professional accreditation is primarily concerned with standards of competence, evaluated against criteria of fitness to practice. This fitness for purpose approach is also the proclaimed approach of the quality audit and teaching quality assessments. The former purports to evaluate the fitness for purpose of the organisational standards against the institutional mission. While there has been account taken of institutional mission, in practice, the approach includes judgements against sector absolutes, irrespective of mission. In principle, teaching quality assessment was also a mission-based fitness-for-purpose evaluation of aspects of the standards of delivery of the student experience but the mission responsiveness of the process has been much less evident than predetermined sector-wide comparative criteria.

While it may have been possible to reconcile and accommodate the different quality approaches of the five evaluation processes they are not easily reconciled with a major government preoccupation – value for money. Furthermore, most academics are concerned with the transformation of their students and find little value in external quality monitoring. External quality evaluation fails to engage with, let alone improve, the learning and teaching interface. It is as though quality audit and teaching quality assessment, despite the direct observation of teaching of the latter, operate at a remove from real engagement with the learning process.

At heart, the British system of quality monitoring failed to engage with transformative learning and teaching. In this respect, it is like most other systems worldwide. The UK has a quarter of a century or more of innovation in learning and teaching but the quality monitoring processes did not connect with this tradition of pedagogic innovation in any significant way. Quality monitoring focused on processes and systems rather than engaged with learning experience of students. Sharing good practice is a minimal outcome of the quality processes in the UK. The gap between quality and learning innovation is manifest in the very different cohorts that attend quality conferences on the one hand, and learning and teaching conferences on the other. In general, formal external evaluations have accountability and compliance focuses rather than the encouragement of continuous quality improvement of the student experience. In most institutions where it occurs, improvement of the student experience is a function of internal review and monitoring processes, usually heavily reliant, nowadays, on student feedback, examiners reports, internal improvement audits, periodic revalidation of programmes of study and staff teams critically self-reflecting on their everyday practice. All of this has far more effect on the student experience than occasional external quality processes, which do little more than result
in a flurry of centrally-controlled and produced documentation and evoke a performance and game-playing culture.

The situation, after a decade or more of external quality evaluation, is that staff comply but there is little real buy-in to quality processes. Staff can easily play the game but most do not appear to see the processes as resulting in significant and long-lasting changes in the student experience. The more cynical view is that the huge quality superstructure is designed to hide a worsening academic base. Evaluations that rely on fitness for purpose tend to be reductionist, fragmenting the notion of quality rather than exploring the complex interrelationships that ultimately impact on the key stakeholders. They are deliberately disassociated from the politics of quality and are incapable of making any link between the quality monitoring procedures, the resource envelope, the student experience of learning and the range of accomplishments and standards of graduates.

When the HEQC was initially established there was a quality enhancement section, which did not last long. The funding councils have rediscovered quality enhancement and the QAA intends to supplement existing quality assurance frameworks through a more active strategy for quality enhancement (QAA Strategic Plan, 2003-2005 on QAA 2003).

Despite the re-emergence of a concern with improvement, little progress is likely within the current external quality-monitoring regime unless there is a radical shift to an integrated process of mutual trust that prioritises improvement of learning. There is little prospect of this despite the potential of ELIR in Scotland and the development of the higher education academy. Quality bureaucracy has never satisfactorily engaged with learning and the continued separation of learning into the academy and quality into the QAA will not resolve the situation. Furthermore, the bureaucratic and burdensome paraphernalia of quality is likely to be increased by internationalisation. Whether it will be another layer of accreditation, as in the Netherlands and Germany, or mutual recognition as between Finland and Denmark, or compliance to supranational agency requirements (such as EQUIS accreditation, which is a private international accrediting body aimed at of business schools), the burden is likely to grow, not diminish. The future of quality is not a real engagement with learning but the advent of more complex evaluation processes: in that setting it is unlikely that the quality of the student experience will improve.

Glossary

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<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>CNAA</td>
<td>Council for National Academic Accreditation</td>
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<td>CVCP</td>
<td>Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom</td>
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<td>ELIR</td>
<td>Enhancement Lead Institutional Review</td>
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<td>HEFCE</td>
<td>Higher Education Funding Council for England</td>
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<td>Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education</td>
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