

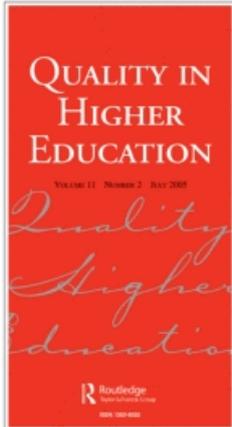
This article was downloaded by: [Harvey, Lee]

On: 21 October 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 780441744]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Quality in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713443244>

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Lee Harvey ^a

^a Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Online Publication Date: 01 November 2006

To cite this Article Harvey, Lee(2006)'Impact of Quality Assurance: Overview of a discussion between representatives of external quality assurance agencies',Quality in Higher Education,12:3,287 — 290

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13538320601051010

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13538320601051010>

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Impact of Quality Assurance: Overview of a discussion between representatives of external quality assurance agencies

LEE HARVEY*

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

ABSTRACT *There has been considerable debate about the impact of external quality assurance in higher education. This paper describes a discussion at the INQAAHE workshop in The Hague, attended by representatives of agencies, exploring the effects of external quality processes on institutions and programmes. The summary, probably for the first time, illuminates the varied impacts that quality processes have from the point of the agencies themselves. The main impacts identified include changes evident from one review to the next; improvements in performance indicators; adoption of formal internal quality processes by institutions; student feedback indicating positive changes and employer perceptions about the improvement in graduate abilities.*

Keywords: External quality assurance; impact of external quality assurance; external quality assurance agencies; INQAAHE

Identifying Impact

This following summarises a discussion at the INQAAHE Workshop in The Hague, about the impact that external quality assurance processes have on institutions and programmes. This represents a perspective from the point of view of the agencies.

The first issue addressed by the discussion group was how they know that quality assurance has had an impact? The group were unanimous in their view that their experience indicates that external quality assurance processes have had some impact and that it is mostly positive. However, the impression is often anecdotal and rarely based on any systematic analysis. This is not surprising as the impact of external quality assurance processes are not easy to measure.

There is an epistemological issue. A naïve positivistic causal link between the actions and requirements of the external quality agency and an effect within the institution cannot be assumed, let alone a simple improvement impact of one on the other.

*Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB, UK.
Email: Lee.Harvey@shu.ac.uk

The actions of the external agency are mediated by national policies and other external affects at national (and international) level. There are also sector changes, including changes in funding, expansion and widening access and pedagogic developments, not least new information technology developments that all impact on institutions and not necessarily in the same direction as intended by quality assurance activities and requirements. The different layers of policy and activity mean that not only is it difficult to isolate cause and effect but that the different strands may operate in different ways at different times to the extent that they may contradict each other. The desire to increase access while cutting funding to the higher education system may not be compatible with improvements in quality. Furthermore, the system of evaluation and improvement is not linear and there is an iterative process of implementation that means that policy and requirements are adjusted on the ground and the original intention modified by practitioners. All of this means that specifying causal relationships is difficult if not impossible. The best we can do is say, as noted above, that there have been changes, which have coincided with a period of attention to quality issues in higher education and leave it as open as to whether quality assurance is directly responsible, has created an atmosphere in which improvement has been encouraged or simply reflects the zeitgeist, brought about by other factors such as massification and consumerism in higher education.

However, the group, drawn from a wide array of countries provided a host of observations that suggested change occurred and that it could be associated with external quality requirements.

First, the group noted that institutions are subject to periodic reviews and it is evident that things change from one review to the next. Further, where agencies undertake follow-ups to see if recommendations are implemented, there is usually a high degree of compliance with the recommended changes.

Second, there are various metrics, such as performance indicators, that suggest improvements are following in the wake of external quality assurance processes. Such indicators include: retention rates, graduation rates and numbers of graduates, the level of graduate final award, graduate employment, employability attributes, entry requirements to programmes of study. The group was in agreement that these indicators are improving over time suggesting that higher education institutions are consistently doing better. However, the group was adamant that any evaluation of impact of external quality assurance should not be judged on the basis of available metrics as they have considerable potential to distort reality.

Third, the group remarked on the widespread developments within institutions. Not only are institutions subject to periodic reviews but have also instituted such reviews as part of internal quality processes. The establishment of quality assurance units (or equivalent) inside institutions is indicative of the internal focus. In addition, many institutions have quality-related mission statements, policies and strategies.

Fourth, some of the group referred to surveys of institutions that they had undertaken and others spoke of informal contacts that had revealed an acknowledgement by institutions of the positive benefits of external quality assurance. Discussants suggested that initial reactions might be hostile or, alternatively, expressing what the institution thought the agency wanted to hear but that over time a degree of honesty emerged in the reaction to external procedures.

Fifth, there tended to be a general agreement that the self-evaluation report was the main benefit of the external quality procedures, which reflects anecdotal evidence from institutions themselves. Whether or not there is a prevailing myth about the efficacy of the self-evaluation procedure, the view of the group was that self-evaluation works but that it

would not be undertaken adequately, if at all, outside the context of the whole external monitoring process, including the site visit. A corollary of the attributed value of the self-evaluation report is the general encouragement, by agency representatives, of a move towards a self-regulated system.

Sixth, improvement can be seen in the outcomes of student satisfaction surveys. Further, there is a tendency to engage students in the quality process, as witnessed by their inputs into the self-evaluation process.

Seventh, the discussants were of the view that graduates are more reflective and more attuned to the labour market than ever before and that they are better prepared for professional practice.

Eighth, this view about graduates, the group argued, is reflected in positive employer opinions of graduates, larger numbers notwithstanding. Most employers are satisfied with the graduates they employ and rate the all-round abilities of graduates highly: even if they are faced with a more difficult recruitment task.

A ninth argument was rather more speculative but some discussants thought that a cost-benefit analysis would show high impact for a relatively small part of the education budget.

Nature of the Impact

The group briefly reviewed what they considered to be the impact on different facets of the higher education undertaking: on student learning, on (teaching) staff and on research.

There are various impacts of external quality monitoring on student learning. First, institutions are required to take responsibility for students enrolled. Second, curricula have been adjusted as the result of review. Third, there has been a growing concern about attrition rates. Fourth, course evaluations have been introduced. Fifth, appeals and complaints procedures have been set up. Sixth, rather more radically, teachers have thought about different ways of doing things, reviewing pedagogy, which has possibly led to better teaching (although there is little systematic evidence to confirm such impressions). Seventh, standards of student achievement have improved in many countries; this includes competencies (such as team working and communication) as well as knowledge and academic skills. This, as noted above, is attested to be employers who now employ more graduates than before.

In general, there is a focus on outcomes and a rather more flexible approach to provision. In some cases this has gone hand-in-hand with a reduction in over-teaching, which had characterised some systems. However, the massification in other systems has perhaps resulted in reduced face-to-face teaching time, which may have mediated against improvements in quality. Another improvement, for some, has been better contractual arrangements for teaching staff as a result of external quality assurance.

Research is one area where the discussants thought external quality processes had made little impact. Quality assurance places insufficient focus on research, although it might implicitly address scholarship within the enhancement of the teaching process. Where there is attention paid to research it is rather too closely tied to metrics that link output to funding, which in some cases overwhelms other quality improvement processes related to teaching.

A reason for the relative lack of focus on research might, the discussants thought, be because there are relatively well-established international research indicators, notably peer review for publication. However, external quality assurance may need to take more account of research and monitor impact on research and scholarly activity.

It should be remembered that the views expressed by the group come from an agency perspective and they tended not to address the main complaints from the sector. One of the

main complaints of staff is of too much bureaucracy and a lack of time to deal with the quality requirements. Staff also regard quality as a manifestation of managerialist control. The use of quality outcomes by marketing departments and the general construction and manipulation of league tables are also areas of concern for staff who see this as demeaning quality improvement processes.

Students complain that quality processes are concealing the declining staff–student contact and fail to take account of the increased financial burdens they face with the inevitable increase in external paid work. Institutions themselves have expressed concerns about the cost burden of external quality assurance, both staff time and the production and collation of documents.

Conclusion

Assessing impact is difficult and complex, not least isolating the quality assurance factor. It would be a mistake to try and identify quantitative factors alone, qualitative analysis is important as well as the appreciation of the iterative processes that convert policy and intention into implemented action. The main impacts identified by the respondents include the changes evident in the review process from one review to the next; improvements in performance indicators; the establishment by institutions of internal quality assurance units and formal processes; institutional declarations that they regard the external process as having led to improvements; feedback from students indicating positive changes and statements from employers suggesting a perceived improvement in graduate abilities.

None the less, it should be noted that the *Guidelines of Good Practice* (INQAAHE, 2005) encourage agencies to gather information or develop awareness of impact and the discussants explored how INQAAHE might help evaluate impact. They suggested workshops and training, sharing of evaluations and other relevant publications as well as the production and updating of the *Guidelines of Good Practice* and the *Analytic Quality Glossary* (Harvey, 2004–2006).

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