Quality in Higher Education

Transforming quality evaluation

Lee Harvey; Jethro Newton

Online Publication Date: 01 July 2004

To cite this Article Harvey, Lee and Newton, Jethro(2004)'Transforming quality evaluation'.Quality in Higher Education,10:2,149 — 165
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/1353832042000230635
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1353832042000230635

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Transforming Quality Evaluation

LEE HARVEY & JETHRO NEWTON

ABSTRACT This paper outlines the preponderant approaches to external quality evaluation, including the purpose, focus, object, rationale, and methods of external evaluations. Accountability, compliance and, in some countries, control are much more frequent rationales for external monitoring than improvement. Research on the impact of quality monitoring is difficult because it is impossible to control all relevant factors to be able to map causal relationships. Arguably, such an endeavour is a positivist device that ignores the complexity and the wider socio-political context of the quality phenomenon. Nonetheless, there is some impact research, which might be characterised as overview studies or close-up studies. These studies reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has, in itself, contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience. Where changes to the student experience have taken place, this has arguably been the result of factors other than the external quality monitoring: at best the existence of the latter provides a legitimation for internally-driven innovation. If quality evaluation is to be transformed to make it transforming it is time to reclaim quality evaluation from opportunistic politicians, re-establish trust in higher education and focus attention on internal processes and motivators. Instead of politically acceptable methods, quality evaluation needs to adopt appropriate research methodologies. The paper will conclude by exploring the conditions under which quality evaluation might be transformed.

Introduction

Higher education has changed markedly in many countries over the last 15 years. Widening access, increased demand, new technologies, borderless education, reduced government funding, new forms of governance have all played a major role in the recent changes. It is a moot point whether external quality processes have had any significant role in the transformation process or whether they have acted to contain it, constrain it or legitimate the changes.

This paper will explore ways in which external quality evaluation might be transformed to contribute to an improvement in the transformation of the student learning experience (and the efficacy and impact of research outcomes). Worldwide, the preponderant approach to external quality evaluation is pragmatic, often working backwards from the political presumption, driven by new public management ideology, that higher education needs to be checked if it is to be accountable. In some cases, the method is determined before the purpose. Self-assessment and performance indicators, peer review and public reporting, although not a universal method, has become the norm and this approach is applied irrespective of the purpose, rationale, object and focus of external evaluation.

The Current Situation

Before suggesting how the current situation might be transformed, the paper will provide an outline of the essentials of current approaches before examining their impact.
Approaches

Broadly speaking, external evaluation falls into four types of activity: accreditation, audit, assessment, and external examination (or external standards monitoring of one sort or another). It is not the purpose of this paper to examine these different forms of evaluation and their overlaps or to unravel the differences between standards and quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2002a; Harvey & Askling, 2003). For present purposes, accreditation refers to a process resulting in a decision that warrants an institution or programme; audit explores internal processes; assessment passes a judgement (often with a grading) usually about the quality of a teaching or research subject area; and external examination checks standards (be they academic, competence, service or organisational).

Purposes

What is less often examined is what the approach adopted is supposed to do. Much seems to be taken for granted. What is the fundamental object of the evaluation, for example? Is it the educational provider, or the specific programme, or the learner, or the output of the programme or institution (Figure 1). Often this is unclear. While talking about the quality of the learner experience, most approaches seem to examine the provision. That’s a bit like evaluating the quality of a football match for spectators by examining the stadium, the pitch, the team sheet and the credentials of the coach.
Rationale

The lack of clarity arises because the rationale is rarely openly admitted. The rhetoric and documentary preambles in many countries refer to quality evaluation as a process of improvement, yet all the emphases are on accountability, compliance and, in some cases, control of the sector (Figure 1). Indeed, the political initiative driving much external evaluation is about establishing delegated accountability (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey, 2004). It is noticeable that, with few exceptions, most systems start off in this vein, even if they subsequently introduce an improvement element. In Europe, the introduction of bachelors–masters programmes is leading to an emphasis (or re-emphasis) on accreditation.

Accountability. Accountability has been the dominant underlying rationale for introducing quality evaluation. In countries where university autonomy is traditional (such as the UK) or based on the market, there has been a growing demand for explicit accountability. Conversely, in countries where higher education has been controlled (as in mainland Europe), accountability is the price of increased autonomy. Accountability is required because of the cost of massification, the need to account for and prioritise public expenditure, and hence the pressure to ensure value for both private and public monies. There is also a more general pressure: to identify clear lines of accountability within higher education systems.

A second aspect of accountability is to students: assurance that the programme of study is organised and run properly, and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered. In some cases, quality evaluation aims to ensure that students receive comparable ‘service’: quantity and quality of teaching, study facilities, learning support, pastoral support, equality of opportunity and so on. Evaluations can be used to monitor whether students are getting an acceptable level of service.

A third accountability purpose is the generation of public information about the quality of institutions and programmes. This might be information for funders that can be used, for example, to aid funding allocation decisions. It may be information for users, such as prospective students and graduate recruiters, that helps inform choice. However, there is little evidence to suggest that when making selections, students or employers make much use of information that results from quality monitoring evaluations.

Control. In many countries, especially those with a significant public sector, governments seek to control unrestrained growth in higher education. They may do this via financial controls or ministerial decree but increasingly quality monitoring and accreditation are being used to restrict expansion. Linked to this is the perceived need to ensure the status and standing and legitimacy of higher education. External review is used to ensure that the principles and practices of higher education are not being eroded or flouted, thereby undermining the intrinsic quality of university-level education and research. Globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education, new forms of delivery, and an increasingly unrestricted market, are all features of a landscape that seems to be out of control. This has resulted in international as well as national attempts to control higher education.

The control aspect of quality evaluation specifically addresses the comparability of standards: that is, the standard or level of student academic or professional achievement, nationally and internationally. Attempts have been made to ‘benchmark’ academic standards including: externally-set and marked examinations; specification of the content of syllabuses; (threshold) descriptors of outcomes; external examiners to ensure inter-institu-
tional comparability of awards. The use of external examiners, for example, is well-established in some countries as a means of making comparisons between programmes within subject disciplines.

Compliance. External quality evaluation also encourages compliance to emerging or existing government policy. There is growing governmental pressure for the university sector to be more responsive to value-for-money concerns, more relevant to social and economic needs, and to engage in widening access. In addition there is pressure to ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons.

There are other stakeholders who seek compliance through quality monitoring, notably professional or regulatory bodies who may use quality monitoring to check that their preferences or policies are being acknowledged or implemented. Quality monitoring is also a tool that can be used to ensure compliance at the local level, that is, within an institution. For example, quality assurance can be a tool to ensure compliance to local guidelines and regulations.

At its simplest level, quality monitoring has encouraged, or even forced, compliance in the production of information, be it statistical data, prospectuses, or course documents. Such compliance means that taken-for-granted practices and procedures have had to be confronted and clearly documented. It represents the minimum required shift from an entirely producer-oriented approach to higher education to one that acknowledges the rights of other stakeholders to minimum information and a degree of “service” (Harvey, 1998, p. 241).

Quality monitoring can also be used as a smoke screen to ensure compliance to resource restrictions by covering the issues that arise when student numbers increase rapidly without a commensurate increase in staffing and resources: the very element of the ‘performance’ played out in peer visits that most demotivates academics. Indeed, as Barrow has commented, the state and the institutional management ‘maintain a degree of surveillance from a distance that ensures that the requirements of the system are met’ (Barrow, 1999, p. 35).

Improvement. Most systems of external review claim to encourage improvement. Despite the rhetoric, improvement has been a secondary feature of most systems, especially at the initial stage. In some rare cases, such as the initial Swedish audits, improvement was designed in from the outset through the identification of improvement projects and evaluating their effectiveness. In the UK, improvement was kept separate from audit in the inaugural HEQC, before the enhancement section was closed. Compliance and accountability have been the dominant purposes and any improvement element has been secondary. As systems move into second or third phases, the improvement element has been given more attention.

However, it is necessary to examine claims for an improvement process closely. Does the external quality evaluation aim to improve academic or research quality and, if so, how is that measured? Or is it really claiming to improve standards? Is the purpose to directly improve the student experience or is it to improve the way the institution monitors its own activities? Or perhaps the improvement amounts to nothing more than ensuring the production of programme documentation and outcomes information. As much as enhanced documentation is valuable, the quality process needs to be able to claim substantively more than the generation of documentation to be convincing in its claims for improvement.
The most effective improvement seems to occur when external processes mesh with internal improvement activities. In the main, external processes tend to effect improvement at the organisational level and may encourage better use of, and investment in, infrastructure. It is more difficult for external review to engage with the learning–teaching interface.

The improvement function of quality monitoring procedures is to encourage institutions to reflect upon their practices and to develop what they do. Evaluation needs to be designed to encourage a process of continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes. Arguably, the assessment of value-added is at the core of any improvement-oriented, value-for-money and transformative approach to quality.

**Focus**

The focus of quality evaluations can also be diverse, ranging from governance and regulation of the institution and its organisational processes, through to its financial viability. It may focus on the qualification *per se*, or the student experience of learning in general, which may or may not include evaluation of curriculum design, programme content, medium of delivery and student and administrative support.

**Methods**

Again, different objects of concern require different approaches and methods. However, as suggested, there is a dominant methodology, sometimes adopted, it seems, irrespective of its suitability. This paper will not discuss the merits of the predominant approach, save to say that relying on an accurate self-assessment in a high-stakes context, with poorly-trained amateur peers engaged in a confrontational setting, results in contrived dialogue and very little information of value to encourage improvement at the learner–teacher interface or improvement of research outputs (Harvey, 1997). The contrived dialogue of these external events is in stark contrast to the open and sharing dialogue increasingly found within institutions. Not all academics are willing to work in teams or reveal their teaching practices but this individualistic approach is increasingly being replaced by openness and discussion about pedagogy.

What is surprising is the lack of thought about the appropriateness of the methods of investigation used in external quality evaluation. Rather than starting with purpose, focus and data requirements, then designing an appropriate methodology, quality monitoring has been characterised by pre-specifying the method (ignoring the epistemological aspect of methodology) and using convenience measures, irrespective of their intrinsic value or whether they are appropriate operationalisations of any concepts under investigation. In essence, purpose, focus and object of study are *post hoc* rationalisations. The political rationale overwhelms the enquiry methodology. Perhaps it is time to set aside the performances and game-playing of external quality evaluation and replace it with some systematic research.

**Impact**

There are problems in undertaking impact studies, not least because there is a significant time element. Despite the problems there are some impact studies, which fall into three broad types (Harvey, 1999). The first type, opinionated or ‘theoretical’ analyses, tend to ‘predict’ the likely affects of the introduction of, or change in, evaluation systems (Wilson, 1996). The second type are analyses that are based on limited available evidence, much of
it anecdotal: for example, the value attributed to self-evaluation is based on accumulations of such anecdotal evidence (Harvey, 1998). The third type are analyses based on systematic data collection (Harvey, 1999). These type-three studies range from feasibility and system modification studies to studies of the effectiveness and impact of the system put in place. Most studies tend to be reviews of effectiveness in establishing quality systems and there are relatively few that undertake to explore the impact that the process has had on, for example, the learning experience, pedagogic development, or the nature of research outcomes (Harvey, 2004).

Evaluations of impact may be institution-specific or sector-wide. Baldwin’s (1997) evaluation of the impact on Monash University, of the short-lived Australian evaluations of the 1990s, suggested that despite criticisms it focused attention on teaching and learning. Debate about effective learning and the use of student perspectives in the shaping of programmes of study had intensified and, whether directly or coincidentally, there had been an improvement in the quality of attention given to teaching and learning at Monash. This may have been due to the external quality monitoring process or to the impact of new technology.

Askling (1997) explored the impact of the Swedish National Agency on Linköping University. She suggested that the Agency acted, ‘in a soft and supportive way’ as a catalyst, rather than having a direct impact. However, Askling also 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).

A study at Sheffield Hallam University (Harvey et al., 2003) sought academics’ perceptions of the different external monitoring processes in England. Although some processes, notably external examination, were perceived as providing a check on standards, there was little support for the view that external quality evaluation improved the student learning experience.

Horsburgh’s (1998) undertook a longitudinal study of the role and importance of external processes on the development of transformative learning in the classroom. Rather than start from the external processes and explore whether changes recommended have been put in place, or attempt to construct a decontextualised model of the effects of a quality system, Horsburgh approaches from the other direction. She starts by identifying the elements needed for transformation and constructs a framework that structures her observations, interviews and wide-ranging document reviews. The factors that had a significant impact on changing two degree programmes were:

- the programme-development team who determine the curriculum intent and philosophy;
- 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 (1999, p. 23) suggests that there are far more important factors impacting on innovation in learning than external quality monitoring. She concludes that, overall, the greatest impact on student learning was the curriculum, factors that influence the curricu-
lum, 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.

Thus, she argues that quality monitoring must focus on more than systems, inputs and outputs, if effectiveness is to be enhanced.

Warde’s (1996) small-scale study on behalf of the British Sociological Association of the impact of the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise in the UK suggested that the most remarkable impact appeared to be the ‘sense of declining morale, loss of job satisfaction and a decline of collegiality’. Highly significant, for Warde, was that no-one in the small sample reported any positive effects of the RAE.

Most thought it detrimental to quality, of both teaching and research. This stands in stark, if predictable contrast, to the self-assurance of the people responsible for the exercise who, without making explicit the grounds for their beliefs, proclaim its unquestionable success … (Warde, 1996, p. 2)

The recent Sheffield Hallam Survey (Harvey et al., 2003) continues to cast doubt on the success of the RAE; only 21% thought it ensured good value for government research money and only 8% that it was good at ensuring innovative research across the sector.

Lee and Harley (1998) explored the impact of the British RAE on the discipline of economics. They concluded that the RAE has been detrimental to alternative approaches to economics and reinforced a conservative mainstream. This has happened because the RAE process has been appropriated by the ‘mainstream’ economics establishment, exemplified by the Royal Economics Society (RES). 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. 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. 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). As a result non-mainstream economists have been discriminated against and teaching of non-mainstream economics has declined. For Lee and Harley, the RAE has led to a kind of ‘academic cleansing’ in economics.

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 (Bauer & Henkel, 1997).

Newton’s (1999a, 2000, 2002, 2003), Henkel’s (2000), and Trowler’s (1998) close-up studies of the impact of quality and other regulatory processes at an institutional level also combine a critique of impact with a deconstruction of the politics of quality (see, for example, Newton’s deconstructionist comparison of the dominant ‘formal’ meanings of quality as promoted by quality monitoring bodies during the 1990s, with the ‘situated’ perceptions of front-line academics as revealed through close-up, fine-grained study; Newton, 2002). Based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with both ‘front-line’ staff and academic managers, Newton (2002) explored the divergence between the views of ‘managers’ and ‘managed’. He identified a ‘policy implementation gap’ and argued that situational factors and context are crucial in quality development. The ‘success’ of a system may be dependent less on rigour of application, than on its contingent use by actors and interest groups, and on how the system is viewed and interpreted by them. From this he argued that, when associated with (or led by) managerial objectives (as
quality systems at national and institutional levels most certainly appear to be), quality appears as ‘accountability’ and ‘managerialism’. It follows that, at the operational level, ‘quality’ can only properly be understood relative to how actors, particularly ‘front-line’ actors, construe and construct ‘quality’ or a ‘quality system’. In turn, he argues, this demands that attention is paid to actors’ subjectivities and how this influences how they ‘react to’, ‘shape’, or even ‘subvert’ quality policy.

Methodological Issues

Research on the impact of quality monitoring is difficult because it is impossible to control all relevant factors to be able to map causal relationships. However, this is not just a matter of causal attribution and the building of causal models. As has been shown in the example of ‘close-up’ studies, the relationship between quality monitoring, on the one hand, and changes in the quality of provision on the other, are not linear but dialectical and phenomenological. Identifying and isolating ‘impacts’ is a positivist device that ignores the complexity and the wider context of the quality phenomenon. It ignores the complexity of the intervening variables (in positivistic terms), disregards human agency (in phenomenological terms) and the fails to take account of the interrelationship of the specific and the wider context in dialectical terms (for a discussion of the application of structuration theory, see Giddens, 1991; Stones, 1991; for the conceptualisation of how academics engage with external quality monitoring systems, see Newton, 1999b).

The process is not reducible to systems analysis. It is important to distinguish between the quality system and the methodology used to evaluate them. Systems approaches are prevalent in quality work in higher education and, as Barrow (1999) suggests, they tend to operationalise the work of academics so that it is amenable to the development of auditable systems. However, one does not need a systems approach to evaluate a system. On the contrary, a systems approach will not get beyond the evaluation system to explore the wider context in which it is situated.

Furthermore, as suggested in Reynolds and Saunders’s (1987) notion of the ‘implementation’ staircase, seeing simplistic causal chains between government initiatives, such as the introduction of quality procedures, and changes in the system, is predicated on a naïve top–down policy implementation process. Policy is rarely implemented as anticipated as there is an interactive process between policy construction and ‘street-level’ implementation, and different players respond differently to policy and strategy (MacDonald, 2002).

The ‘politics of quality’ mean that the dialectical relationship between quality monitoring and the quality of what is monitored must be located within a holistic context that accounts for structure, history and ideology. To model a system of quality disengaged from such processes is fundamentally misconceived and colludes with the dominant political agendas rather than regards them as subject matter for investigation.

A fundamental issue is how compliance requirements are obscured by a thinly-veiled discourse about improvement, information requirements, stakeholder rights and so on (HEFCE, 2003b). In any social research, especially of a socio-political setting, it is necessary to engage and critique ideology. Yet there has been reluctance within ‘higher education’, as a discipline, to critique the ideology of quality evaluation. The foregoing discussion is incompatible with a view that suggests evaluation is a neutral measuring process. Quality evaluation is a process imbued with politics.

Despite the political proclivity for naïve positivistic impact data, serious research needs to consider a critical social research approach (Harvey, 1990; Harvey & MacDonald, 1993; Harvey et al., 1999). Evaluating the impact of quality evaluation is not just a matter of
specifying a remit, identifying evaluation criteria and adopting the same methods of investigation as the evaluators adopt in their evaluations. A methodology for evaluating the impact of quality evaluation must engage the politics of quality, go beyond any limiting specification, critique ideology, dig beneath the surface, dialectically deconstruct the prevailing perception, question the rationale and reconstruct an alternative understanding of the process, as Horsburgh (1998) and Newton (1999b) have done at institutional level. Only in that way will we start to see whether quality evaluation is transformative and thus in what ways we should transform it to make it more appropriate.

Overview of Impact Studies

Most impact studies reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability and has contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience.

Most effectiveness and impact studies have focused on the effect external quality monitoring has on staff, on internal procedures, or on management structures in institutions. It is far less clear what impact external and internal quality monitoring is having on the student experience. There appears, for example, to be little articulation between quality monitoring and innovation in learning and teaching. Indeed, there are few studies (Horsburgh, 1998, apart) that attempt to address the impact on the student experience.

Where changes to the student experience have taken place, this is just as likely to have been the result of factors other than the external quality monitoring (Newton, 2000, pp. 158–59) and, at best, the existence of the latter provides a legitimation for internally-driven innovation. Although valuable, independent impact evidence is limited, what has emerged is an indication that quality evaluation does need to be transformed.

Transforming Quality Evaluation: improving the student learning experience—the case of the UK

How then might quality evaluation be transformed, and higher education institutions be encouraged and supported in their efforts to secure improvement and transformation in the student learning experience? In the remainder of the paper it is argued that, where accountability is well-established, quality evaluation should be premised on the notion of ‘self-regulation’. Then, a case is put forward for an evidence-based, enhancement-led approach to quality evaluation. Finally, an outline is provided of a proposed model for the transformation of external quality evaluation.

The Principle of Self-regulation

At the centre of this present discussion is the issue of how the status of teaching and learning can best be raised, and the quality of the student experience continuously improved. It is taken as axiomatic that higher education institutions must ensure that they properly discharge their responsibilities for quality and standards. Nevertheless, in the UK, for example, national quality audit and assessment reports over the past decade and a half have, increasingly, confirmed that institutions have in place elaborate quality management systems and arrangements for quality assurance. Indeed, a study, undertaken jointly by Roger Cook (Napier University) and the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES, 2002a), of the UK Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) exercise, and covering more than 2000 university departments over a 7-year period, put the cost of TQA to the sector at over £300
million. Yet, just one department (0.05% of all the provision inspected) was found to be permanently failing. Moreover, the Chief Executive of the QAA, Peter Williams, confirms this general picture when announcing the publication of an overview report of the 2,904 reviews and assessments carried out in England and Northern Ireland between 1993 and 2001. Pointing to the ‘sturdy “quality culture” within institutions’ that had developed, Williams describes the story as ‘one of generally high quality in all subjects, with satisfied students and a level of commitment from teachers that was remarkable in the face of ever-increasing workloads and declining resources’ (THES, 2004).

Accountability in the area of quality assurance is now well-established in countries such as the UK, with self-imposed quality assurance behaviours and practices now the norm. Therefore, a shift in emphasis in quality evaluation, towards how institutions might be encouraged in their efforts to develop a sharper focus on mechanisms and arrangements for quality enhancement, is timely. In the UK, at the end of the 1990s, several national quality enhancement bodies with an explicit focus on learning and teaching enhancement were established. These included the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE), the Learning and Teaching Subject Network (LTSN), and the National Coordination Team. All of these will be assimilated into the newly created Higher Education Academy. This highlights the tension between ‘accountability’, as signified in the activities of external quality monitoring bodies, and ‘enhancement’ or ‘transformation’ of learners and learning, as exemplified through the activities of the Academy and its constituent elements.

The question arises as to how student learning will be improved with a shift in focus from accountability, as represented in the type of external quality monitoring and evaluation currently undertaken at national level, to the potential contribution of national quality enhancement bodies working closely with higher education institutions, and with ‘communities of practice’ at the level of subject disciplines. Jackson pointed to imbalance in this area some seven years ago, when he lamented that ‘virtually every aspect of academic practice is now subject to some form of regulatory control or external scrutiny’ (Jackson, 1997b, p. 165). In a similar vein, Williams, discussing quality evaluation regimes, argued that national audit and assessment ‘should be seen more as development opportunities to be exploited than ordeals to be suffered’ (Williams, 1996, p. 5).

In view of the foregoing, the merits of ‘self-regulation’ are evident. Even as far back as 1994, Mantz Yorke urged the need for an enhancement-led approach, proposing ‘a greater degree of reliance on self-regulation in the system, coupled with a relatively “light touch” external monitoring system’ (Yorke, 1994, p. 9). Similarly, Harvey (1996) proposed a system that audited continuous improvement with the focus clearly on improvement agendas at the programme level determined by staff and students conjointly. Jackson (1997a, p. 51) has defined the characteristics of an ‘ideal type’, self-regulating institution, ‘with a capacity to audit their own affairs’ as including:

- robust and effective internal review and audit mechanisms;
- an institutional focus on self-evaluation;
- an appropriate level of external peer appraisal.

These are precisely the characteristics that routinely inform the quality management and quality assurance arrangements typically found in UK universities and higher education institutions. Such arrangements point to the extent to which the principle of the ‘self-regulating institution’, and the notion of ‘dialogic evaluation processes’, are of increasing significance in debates about enhancing the student experience.
In calling for a research-informed, evidence-based approach to quality evaluation, some pointers are provided here towards how the present quality evaluation and quality enhancement debates may be taken forward into new directions. The proposition also draws on evidence from an institutional case study into the way in which one UK university college approaches quality enhancement, and the outcomes of an internal audit of how departments and academic staff use the enhancement activities and resources of national quality enhancement bodies.

The present context in the UK is an interesting one. Many institutions are revising their quality assurance processes and are releasing considerable energies in support of enhancement: institutional learning and teaching strategies have been revised; there has been an upsurge of interest in the establishment of educational development units; there is a relatively new infrastructure at national level for supporting enhancement; and following a major review of Teaching Quality Enhancement, undertaken on behalf of the higher education funding council (HEFCE, 2003a), a new Higher Education Academy has been established. Given that there is also considerable ministerial interest in the ways in which higher education is seeking to pursue an improvement agenda, it is apparent that quality enhancement has become increasingly important politically. A re-aligned, evidence-based approach to quality evaluation could provide much needed insights into what makes improvement initiatives work, what the principal barriers to success are, and how arrangements for quality enhancement at national level might work to the best advantage of all who have an interest in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. We do not, though, as yet, have available to us a robust evidence base to illustrate what it is that works in practice for quality evaluation and quality enhancement, and why it works. The idea of an evidence-based approach to policy and practice is by no means new (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). Davies et al. (2000, p. 1) describe it as policies that are ‘based in some degree upon research-based evidence about “what works and what doesn’t”’.

The methods and frameworks adopted by external quality monitoring bodies over the last decade or so, can hardly be said to have been informed by systematic research, or to have been derived from evidence-based policy. Indeed, for the most part, they appear to have been driven by opportunism, political expediency, and a marked lack of trust in higher education. Indeed, Brown argued that: ‘We need more enhancement and a little less regulation in quality assurance’ (THES, 2002b, p. 18). Moreover, he suggests, the imbalance between regulation and improvement has proved to be a major obstacle to the development of UK higher education. Furthermore, while the forces of accountability are strong, ‘those devoted to improvement, including the promotion of innovation, are fragmented’. These sentiments contain important messages for present purposes, since one of the strictest tests that can be applied, is to ascertain the extent to which any given quality system or evaluation process leads to quality enhancement and quality improvement, and also the evidence used to illustrate this.

If quality evaluation is to be transformed in the direction of enhancement of the student experience, and conditions created for bringing about sustained change and improvement in universities, then it is necessary to fully understand what is involved in both ‘quality evaluation’ and ‘quality enhancement’, and to develop far more sophisticated understandings of how higher education institutions work. This entails taking account of the lessons learned from the study of academics working with quality policy, such as those outlined earlier in this paper when we considered how front-line academics perceive, respond to,
and cope with quality evaluation (Newton, 2000, 2002, 2003). Transforming quality evaluation means building on these lessons by seeking to understand not only how academics and institutions respond to quality evaluation, but also how institutions manage the quality enhancement enterprise, and how academics themselves engage with improvement practices.

The position taken here is that national quality evaluation bodies themselves have a responsibility to engage with a research-informed, evidence-based approach to evaluation and enhancement.

Some insights into such matters can be derived from considering the results of an evaluative institutional study, one of four institutional self-studies at UK universities commissioned by the UK Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Generic Centre, a body established in 2000 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to help institutional and disciplinary communities in higher education to achieve their own enhancement goals. The self-evaluation drew on data from an internal audit and survey of how academics used and engaged with the resources and activities of several national quality enhancement bodies: the LTSN; the ILTHE; and the QAA.

Amongst the findings of this institutional study were the following:

- the advantages of agreeing a set of enhancement goals and articulating a position statement or definition of enhancement, perhaps through an institutional quality plan or learning and teaching strategy;
- the importance of local/departmental cultures and communities;
- the need to pay close attention to actors’ subjectivities and how this influences how they cope with and shape policy or change initiatives;
- the need to acknowledge the conflicting motives (internal and external) underpinning enhancement initiatives;
- the need for learning, teaching, and assessment impact studies (what works, how and where) and more information and assistance on models for sharing good practice or on organisational learning;
- the need for institutional mechanisms for tracking and auditing good practice and its dissemination.

Further, what was particularly striking for present purposes was the greater likelihood of engagement by academic staff with the activities and resources of a national body, the less that body is associated by them with accountability, and the more it was seen as delivering enhancement benefits for staff and students (see also the views of delegates to the ‘The End of Quality?’ international seminar; Harvey, 2002b). This particular finding has clear implications for quality evaluation agencies.

The other main messages to emerge from the study, which have a bearing on the question of how conditions favourable to change and enhancement may be created, within transformed arrangements for quality evaluation, are as follows. First, the importance of genuine enhancement rather than over-formalised ‘systems’; second, the need to audit good practice, innovation and dissemination; third, the importance of developing a capacity to research and evaluate what we do, and to utilise the knowledge gained for changing and improving what we do; and fourth, the need for mechanisms for interpreting and harnessing academics’ varied responses to development and enhancement initiatives.

Morris, in her contribution to a LTSN-promoted debate about an evidence-based approach in higher education, reinforces much of what is being argued in this paper (Morris, 2003). In her paper, she attempts to open up discussion about how, as a community of practitioners engaged in the enhancement of learning and teaching, contributors to the
debate ‘might work towards the goal of the improved use of evidence to inform practice and policy’ (Morris, 2003, p. 1). Confirming what has been argued here, she points out that ‘both individual higher education institutions and national bodies have tended to develop policy and procedures in something of an evidential vacuum’. In recommending ‘the development of a fully evidence-based approach to the assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning’ (Morris, 2003, p. 2), she points to the need to develop the capacities of individuals and institutions, a theme taken up later in this paper.

A Proposed Model for the Transformation of Quality Evaluation

This section makes the case for transforming quality evaluation so that it focuses more directly on the object of education, the learner and the learning experience. As Harvey has argued in a paper which focused on quality monitoring and transformative learning, ‘External quality monitoring makes no attempt, in most countries, to encourage quality learning’ (Harvey, 1997, p. 68). Here, an alternative model for external quality evaluation is put forward. The position taken is that if we wish to shift the emphasis of quality evaluation to make it transforming, then quality evaluation needs to be reclaimed from opportunistic politicians, trust in higher education needs to be re-established, and attention focused on internal processes and internal motivators. Sociologists draw a neat distinction between ‘taking problems’ and ‘making problems’. In terms of agenda-setting and the shaping of systems for external quality monitoring and evaluation, the view taken here is that academic communities and quality practitioners alike have, for over a decade, been ‘taking’ rather than ‘making’ the quality agenda, especially where external audit and assessment are concerned. A renewed focus for quality evaluation, on the enhancement of learning and teaching, can help to address this imbalance.

The transformation proposed here takes as its initial reference point Figure 1 (‘External evaluation’), which depicts the major approaches, rationales, objects, focal points and methods used in external evaluation. An alternative model is available (Figure 2).

For present purposes, the alternative route to those shown in Figure 1 can be summarised as follows. The approach is premised on the notion of self-regulation, is enhancement-led, and is evidence-based. While some elements depicted in the models or routes shown in Figure 1, such as audit and external examining, can be incorporated into the approach shown in Figure 2, a new dimension, which is currently absent from external quality evaluation, is an emphasis on a research-informed perspective and capability. The object is the learner and learner output or outcomes; this includes the researcher and research outcomes. In his 1997 paper, Harvey set out some key ingredients of a transformative approach to higher education which could readily be incorporated into the model proposed here, as focal points for evaluation. They are:

- the shift from teaching to learning;
- the development of graduate attributes;
- appropriateness of assessment;
- system for rewarding for transformative teaching and learning facilitation;
- transformative learning for academics;
- emphasis on pedagogy;
- institutional climate to support responsive collegiality;
- linkages between quality improvement and learning.

It follows that the learning experience and learning environment, and any organisational processes which impinge upon them, would also provide a key focus for evaluation.
Fig. 2. External evaluation: alternative research-based model.

In this model the underpinning rationale is improvement. The compliance and verification elements of conventional forms of external quality evaluation are replaced by an enhancement focus, since this is not a system for the inspection of provision. Given that the model is premised on self-regulation, it is argued that accountability follows continuous improvement. Where institutions take up the challenge of self-regulation, the focal point for a genuinely ‘light touch’, enhancement-led approach to quality evaluation, would be a university’s ‘institutional quality enhancement plan’ or ‘learning and teaching improvement strategy’ (Figure 2), and its systems and mechanisms for the identification and dissemination of good practice. The institutional plan, or equivalent, would be used as the focal point for external quality monitoring, but on the basis of external input using a ‘critical friend’ or ‘external consultant’ approach. As is evident in Figure 2, a key requirement of the methods which inform this model is that they should incorporate an evidence-based approach, and that evaluation should be research-informed. Accordingly, while members of an external evaluation team would include both pedagogic expertise and professional experience of quality evaluation, the team would be required to have appropriate expertise in the area of research-informed approaches to learning and teaching. All would operate on the basis of a ‘critical friend’ or ‘consultant’ role.

The ‘plan’ would incorporate self-evaluation of both quality and standards matters. The latter might draw on external examiner reports and student performance data; the former would reference evidence from student surveys. Where an institution is fully taking up the challenge of self-regulation, the institutional plan might also provide a timetable for the internal review and audit of all aspects of the operation of the institution, including learning and student services. This would enable a focus on how the institution itself
reviews the learning infrastructure and the wider processes that impact on the student experience. There may also be merit, from a funding point of view, in what Yorke (1994) has termed learning development (or ‘DevL’) funding. Here, the level of support awarded might reflect the nature and merits of the ‘institutional enhancement plan’, with the strategic development of student learning being encouraged through institutions using their enhancement planning as a basis for bidding over a time frame of, say, three years. The success or progress of the plan would be subject to external evaluation under the overall model proposed here.

There are two distinctive features of this model. First, is the extent of its evaluative focus on the ways in which an institution, through its enhancement planning or learning and teaching strategy, is making progress in its efforts to embed mechanisms for enhancing student learning and to identify and disseminate good practice in learning, teaching, and assessment. The second feature is the institution’s use of both internal and external research and project work in the area of learning and teaching enhancement. It provides an opportunity for an institution to demonstrate how it is making use of the resources and activities of national, regional and international bodies with responsibilities and expertise in the area of learning and teaching enhancement, and of ‘communities of practice’ such as subject associations or professional bodies.

In the UK, an obvious reference point would be the use made of the resources of the Higher Education Academy and its constituent elements, such as the LTSN Subject Centres and Generic Centre, and how these inform enhancement of the curriculum, assessment, and the student experience. A key consideration therefore, in evidence-based terms, is ‘what works’ at this university, in this or that subject area, in respect of improving the quality of learning and teaching, and the evidence used to illustrate this.

This enhancement-led approach requires not only enquiry into structures, mechanisms and procedures but a clear cycle of action involving delegated responsibility to the institution by the external quality evaluation agency, and also within the institution to subject department and programme level, thus reflecting the ‘self-regulatory’ principle. Clear information flows, both vertically and horizontally, are also required.

In sum, such a model incorporates meaningful and supportive dialogue between an external review team and the institution, in contrast to the usual practice in external audit and assessment which routinely involves ‘game-playing’ and artificial exchanges based around an institution defending a position. The focus of evaluation and dialogue is on internal processes, and an underlying intention of the overall methodology is to secure a shift in quality management ideology and practices away from attempts at impression management and controlling appearances, towards encouraging a focus on ‘bottom–up’ driven innovations, cross-institutional cooperation and communication, and a strategic approach which is integrated and focused around the theme of the enhancement of learning and teaching.

From this, it is possible for sector-wide outcomes to be collated at national level for the benefit of the sector, and a national quality evaluation agency is well placed to provide an appropriate focal point for collaborative evidence and data gathering, to facilitate dissemination of research-informed practice across the sector, and also to sponsor small to medium evidenced-based projects by individuals, teams, and collaborative partners, in the area of learning and teaching enhancement. This is a point argued by Morris (2003) in her discussion of the need to build a national infrastructure to support an evidence-based approach to learning and teaching enhancement. Morris puts forward the view that an accumulation of evidence from individual practitioners can have an impact, in terms of improvement of learning and teaching, that separate items of evidence could not achieve.
This argument fits well with the quality evaluation model proposed here since it indicates that when a sufficient volume of cases of good practice, worthy of dissemination, is obtained, a searchable database could be constructed and ‘the essential learning points would be communicated to disciplinary communities and the people who support and enhance teaching in institutions’ (Morris, 2003, p. 5). Morris’s practical suggestion in her discussion, that the success of various types of intervention could form a basis for a thematic clustering of examples of good practice, also resonates well in the context of the quality evaluation model proposed here. Examples she cites include modifications to assessment practices; effective use of student feedback in developing teaching methods; and discipline-specific approaches to skills development. In similar fashion, overviews or compendia of case studies of good practice, of the kind developed in the area of institutional learning strategy by Graham Gibbs, but in this case drawn from quality evaluations, would also enable practice in learning and teaching to be shared as a result of external evaluation (HEFCE, 2001).

References


HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE), 2001, Strategies for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: A guide to good practice, June 01/37 (Bristol, HEFCE).


HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE), 2003b, Information on Quality and Standards: Final guidance, Circular 2003/51 (Bristol, HEFCE).


HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE), 2003b, Information on Quality and Standards: Final guidance, Circular 2003/51 (Bristol, HEFCE).


TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT (THES), 2002a, ‘Good teachers or great stage managers’, Times Higher Education Supplement, 9 August.


TROWLER, P., 1998, Academics Responding to Change: New higher education frameworks and academic cultures (Buckingham, SRHE/OU Press).


