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TRANSFORMING QUALITY EVALUATION: MOVING ON

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance of higher education has become ubiquitous. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education is worldwide, embracing every continent, with membership from about 80 countries. Stensaker (Chapter 5) argues that quality assurance is not just the latest fad but is a remarkably successful management fashion: a success, this chapter suggests, that is sustained by government endorsement because it provides a means of securing accountability.

Quality assurance of higher education is ubiquitous because it provides a means for governments to check higher education. Harvey and Knight (1996) illustrated how quality assurance underpinned processes of delegated authority in systems as diverse as market arrangements in the United States, autonomous public systems in the United Kingdom, previously ministerial-controlled systems in Scandinavia and tightly constrained systems such as China. The beauty of the approach, from the government's point of view, is that quality assurance ensures not only accountability but can be used to encourage a degree of compliance to policy requirements or to control a burgeoning private sector. Even in tightly controlled systems, there is a degree of autonomy in higher education that ministerial decree and laws on higher education can only constrain to a limited extent. While countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and the old Commonwealth wanted to rein in the autonomy of the sector, much of the rest of Western Europe, for example, wanted to decrease ministerial control in the 1990s. In both cases, quality assurance was a useful mechanism by which to do this.

There are, though, several fundamental questions to be asked about the ubiquity of quality assurance. These include: What is the relation of quality assurance to quality in higher education? To what extent does quality assurance ensure the accountability of the quality of higher education? To what extent does quality assurance constrain higher education: does the accountability requirement prioritise compliance and control over improvement? Is it time to replace quality assurance with quality improvement (or enhancement)?[1]

This chapter explores these questions through suggesting an alternative approach to quality assurance. The chapter adapts and extends a proposal, made at the 26th EAIR Forum in Barcelona, in 2004, to transform quality evaluation (Harvey and Newton 2004).[2] The approach in this chapter is one that deconstructs the existing dominant approaches to quality assurance and reconstructs an alternative,

research-informed approach. Not so much a change from assurance to improvement but a shift from externally imposed procedures to internally generated creativity.

At the core, the contention is that asking an amorphous group of academics to identify their strengths and weaknesses and for an agency or ministerial department to send out a raiding party to pass summary judgment on the quality of provision may ensure compliance to policy or regulation or contribute to some form of control over the sector, and it may satisfy the illusion of accountability, but has nothing to do with the essential nature of quality. It is a bureaucratic process quite removed from either the student learning or the creative research processes, which, it is argued, lies at the heart of quality in higher education. What follows is a far-reaching critique of quality assurance. However, this is not a criticism of the way agencies operate; indeed, within their operational parameters, the vast majority of national agencies do a good, conscientious job. The critique is with the fundamental nature of quality assurance per se.

2. APPROACH, OBJECT, FOCUS, RATIONALE AND METHODS

There are four broad approaches to quality assurance: accreditation, audit, assessment and external examination (or external review of service and outcomes standards of one sort or another).[3] Their object of attention ranges from the institution, through subject and programme to the service provision, the learner or the learning outcomes. Different systems vary the emphasis placed on each of these elements. The focus of quality evaluations can also be diverse, ranging from governance and regulation and financial viability to the student experience of learning, curriculum design, programme content and teacher competence. Although methods vary, the process of self-assessment followed by peer review is also prevalent (see Figure 1).[4]

Furthermore, the rationale for quality assurance is often opaque. Accountability is a dominant rationale but that obscures the compliance and control functions. It also obfuscates the improvement function. In policy discourses (i.e. the approach set out in, or underpinning, policy documents on quality assurance in higher education) accountability is pre-eminent; but what exactly accountability is, or requires of the sector, and how that relates to the quality of higher education, is less clear. The often-cited tension between accountability and improvement and the policy discourse that prioritises accountability, means that the improvement essence of quality is sidelined in assurance processes by a focus on demonstrating compliance.

Before elaborating a framework for a new form of quality assurance, the chapter explores:

- the nature of accountability
- the illusory tension between accountability and improvement
- the disregard for the essence of quality, which results in the attenuation of quality assurance into bureaucratic processes propped up by tenuous, albeit popular, 'definitions' of quality

Approach	accreditation	audit	assessment	external ex
Object	provider	programme	learner	output

Focus	govern -anace & regulation	curriculum design	learning experience	medium of delivery	student support
	content of program -mes	financial viability	qualifi -cation	admin support	organisational processes

Rationale	accountability	control	compliance	improvement

Methods	self -assessment	PIs	peer visit	inspection
	document analysis	stakeholder surveys	direct intervention	proxy delegate

Figure 1. External evaluation (Harvey 2003)

2.1. The Nature of Accountability

Accountability has, since the 1990s, been a widely used term linked to all public service, including higher education. The usually stated reasons for the rise of accountability in higher education include the cost and potential problems of massification, the concomitant need to account for increasing amounts of public money, the need to ensure value for both private and public monies (as students are increasingly faced with paying for higher education), lack of clear lines of accountability within higher education systems, globalisation and the need to keep control of an increasingly unrestricted market (Harvey 2002a; Rosa and Amaral, Chapter 8, this volume).

Accountability is seen as a major purpose of external quality processes. However, although policy discourses give primacy to accountability, it is a rather elusive term when it comes to pinning down exactly what it means. A synthetic view of accountability in higher education is that it is "the requirement, when undertaking an activity, to expressly address the concerns, requirements or perspectives of others" (Harvey 2004–2005).[5]

In the higher education context, Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) provide the all-encompassing, albeit somewhat circular, definition that "accountability is the assurance of a unit to its stakeholders that it provides education of good quality".

Quality assurance is about ensuring accountability, which is an assurance that it is good quality!

Higher education is usually seen as responsible to a range of stakeholders, although being held to account for expenditure of public money predominates in most elaborations of accountability. For Lewis, Ikeda, and Dundar (2001), accountability is defined as demonstrating the worth and use of public resources. Higher education in most countries has been faced with greater demands to demonstrate its worth and to account for its use of public resources, partly as a result of fierce competition for tightened state funds and partly as a result of other restructuring taking place throughout the public sector.

In a similar vein, the PA Consulting (2000: 6) study for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) of the UK audit methodology noted that higher education institutions in England receive over £6 billion of public money a year for which they are held to account via statutes, regulations, and contracts.

> The independent, self-governing status of higher education institutions does not absolve them from accountability for their use of public funding. … Accountability in this context refers to the purposes for which public money is voted by Parliament, and the conditions under which institutions receive public funding.

This is, in effect, operationalised by a view that relates accountability directly to performance evaluation:

> Accountability implies the assessment of performance, the public communication of information about performance, and the potential for sanctions or rewards. Combining these words leads quickly to questions about content, power relationships, and legitimacy in educational accountability. At the outset one must ask, who is accountable, for what, and to whom? Then, are the goals and standards appropriate, are the measurements of performance valid and reliable, do those seeking to hold others accountable have legitimate expertise and authority (NCAHE 2004)?

An alternative take on this is that accountability is bound up with governance:

> Accountability: A public or private organisation must be accountable to the organisation and to society in general to ensure good governance. This means that information about set goals that have been achieved and how they have been achieved should be transparent. Universities, as public organisations, also work to establish the appropriate mechanisms to make themselves accountable to their sector and to citizens. (GUNI 2003: 1)

An alternative view relates accountability to collective responsibility:

> *Accountability* [in education] is defined as: the assurance that all education stakeholders accept responsibility and hold themselves and each other responsible for every learner having full access to quality education, qualified teachers, challenging curriculum, full opportunity to learn, and appropriate, sufficient support for learning so they can achieve at excellent levels in academic and other student outcomes.
>
>   By implication in this definition, where the system and those who are responsible for it fail the learner, they also share the blame. No one group of stakeholders can point the finger of blame at any other. *All stakeholders* bear the responsibility for student school success and the blame when students are not successful. (IDRA 2002)

A Canadian definition places responsibility on governments to make higher education institutions accountable to the public:

> Accountability is defined as the degree to which provincial governments ensure that universities and colleges are in fact accountable to the public, and not to corporations or individual sponsors or clients. In addition, it means that universities and colleges, and their functions of teaching, research and community service remain in the public domain and are not privatized. This is determined largely by the amount of public funding dedicated to post-secondary education budgets, as compared to funding from private donations or student fees, which download the cost of education to individuals. (Doherty-Delorme and Shaker 2001: 9)

2.1.1. Functions of Accountability

For NCAHE (2004):

> The ultimate purposes of accountability systems [are] to improve performance, to assure quality, to sustain confidence.

Harvey (2002a) suggested that accountability is somewhat more complex and has five main functions. First, to ensure that the institution or programme is accountable for the money it gets, which is reflected in the definitions above. A second accountability function is to ensure that the core principles and practices of higher education are not being eroded or disregarded. This form of accountability is mainly used to control the development of private providers but can be used to ensure that public providers do not become lax. Third, accountability to students requires that the programme is organised and run properly and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered: an implicit service agreement. A fourth accountability purpose of quality evaluation procedures is the generation of public information that funders can use to aid funding allocation decisions, and prospective students and graduate recruiters can use to inform choice. A fifth accountability purpose is to use quality evaluation as a vehicle to achieve compliance to policy. The PA Consulting study (2000: 10) also draws out the clear link between accountability and compliance:

> But accountability expectations increasingly go beyond this fiduciary compliance to include the achievement of Government policy objectives, even when the service providers, namely the HEIs, are constitutionally independent of Government. The Government has placed increasing emphasis on securing specified outputs and outcomes from publicly funded activities in response to community expectations about improving service quality and policy effectiveness. This is reflected in output-based funding models and increasing attention to outcome-based performance targets.

Governments around the world are looking for higher education to be more responsive. This includes responding to value-for-money imperatives, making higher education more relevant to social and economic needs, widening access to higher education and expanding numbers, usually in the face of decreasing unit cost. In addition, there is pressure to ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons.

It is also worth noting at this point, although it is discussed further below, that accountability is also intrinsically bound up with the fitness-for-purpose definition of quality. Peter Williams (2002: 1), Chief Executive of the UK Quality Assurance Agency, for example, alludes to this interrelationship when he notes:

> In the world at large, 'quality assurance' describes all aspects of the ways in which organisations try to make sure that their activities are fully fit for their intended purposes, that they are doing 'what it says on the tin'. The reasons for organisations to want to do this are numerous: it may be to satisfy themselves that they are meeting the needs of their clients, or to account to paymasters for financial assistance received. It may be to gain a marketing advantage over their competitors, or simply a wish to be sure that they are doing a fully professional job. All these reasons can apply to higher education.

All of this suggests that accountability is an inclusive phrase for various compliance, control and value-for-money expectations. Accountability is supposedly a guiding force but, like a mirage in a desert, it is illusory as a quality destination. Quality assurance for accountability is, as the quote above suggests, fulfilling a purpose. This may be admirable but the purpose is not at the essential heart of quality, as will be explored below. But first, another mirage: the Scylla and Charybdis of accountability and improvement.

2.2. The Illusory Tension Between Accountability and Improvement

The perpetual debate about accountability and improvement is as old as quality assurance in higher education. The tension between accountability and continuous quality improvement was pointed out by Vroeijenstijn and Acherman (1990). The dichotomy is much discussed in the quality literature (Frederiks, Westerheijden, and Weusthof 1994; Middlehurst and Woodhouse 1995; Vroeijenstijn 1995). Quality assurance, so the argument goes, is between a rock and a hard place. It is torn between improvement and accountability.

However, the discussion of the dichotomy conceals as much as it reveals. First, it specifies just two of the four purposes of quality processes: concealing compliance and control. Second, it reinforces a perceived irreconcilable tension: to be accountable, it is claimed, requires different mechanisms than to improve (e.g. Yolonde and Luff 2005). There are those, though, who think that the tension can be patched up:

> If accountability and enhancement are key elements of quality assurance, then they should be inextricably linked, not placed in opposition to one another. (Williams 2002: 1)

Indeed, many systems of quality evaluation attempt to be accountable while advocating improvement. This is usually based on the idea that improvement follows accountability. The accountability-led view sees improvement as a secondary function of the monitoring process. Such an approach argues that a process of external monitoring of quality, which is ostensibly for purposes of accountability, is likely to lead to improvement as a side effect. Requiring accountability, it is assumed, will lead to a review of practices, which in turn will result in improvement.

However, this has been questioned on three grounds (Harvey 1994). First, it is likely that, faced with a monitoring system that demands accountability, academics will comply with requirements in such a way as to minimise disruption to their existing academic practices. Second, where accountability requires the production of strategic plans, clear objectives, quality assurance systems, and so on, then there

may be an initial impetus towards quality improvement. However, there is little evidence to suggest a sustained momentum as a result of this initial push. Accountability systems, in short, are unlikely to lead to a process of *continuous* quality improvement. The argument is that improvement comes from a changed culture and local ownership, which compliance processes do not encourage. Third, accountability approaches tend to de-motivate staff who are already involved in innovation and quality initiatives. Not only do they face the added burden of responding to external scrutiny, there is also a feeling of being manipulated, of not being trusted or valued, by managers and outside agencies.

Indeed, as has been argued elsewhere (Newton 2002a), it is important to reflect on the 'career' of quality as a concept and compare the formal meanings of 'quality' that were dominant in the early 1990s with the 'situated' perceptions of quality of front-line academics, which had become embedded within institutions by the mid-1990s. Accordingly, as Newton illustrates, drawing on his ethnographic study of how academics experienced 'quality as accountability' in the 1990s:

- Quality became associated with 'ritualism' and 'tokenism', with academics using procedures primarily to satisfy external requirements and improvement at best merely a residual feature of quality systems.

- Quality became linked with 'discipline' and 'technology', with academics perceiving 'improvements in quality assurance' as distinct from improvements in quality.

- Quality was 'lack of mutual trust', with an emphasis on front-line academics' responsibilities and no real reciprocal accountability on the part of senior managers.

The counter to the view that accountability will lead to and result in improvement is to reverse the accountability-led view: improvement is its own accountability. If an organisation continually improves it is being accountable. This reverses the taken-for-granted view that agencies have to first discharge an accountability function and then encourage improvement. The proposed framework works on placing emphasis on research-based improvement, which itself will discharge accountability, unless, of course, 'accountability' is in reality about control rather than delegated responsibility.

A more recent development, as D'Andrea (Chapter 9) has also noted, has indeed been to shift the focus of agency approaches (for mature agencies) from assurance to enhancement (see note 1). Williams (2002: 1) asked:

> Is quality enhancement the new quality assurance? After many years of discussion and argument about whether or not, and if so how, an external agency should review the academic quality and standards of higher education, primarily for the purpose of accountability, the spotlight has now turned away from questions of accountability towards enhancement. A new and influential committee [in the UK], the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) … has drawn a distinction between 'quality assurance' and 'quality enhancement'. Although this has been done mainly for convenience – so as to recognise the particular and unique role of the Agency in the quality assurance landscape – it nevertheless raises the question once again of what quality assurance actually is, and whether we in the Agency have any part to play in the enhancement of quality in higher education.

However, all these positions tend to miss the point. If accountability is fundamentally about ensuring compliance to financial and policy requirements and regulations, then the notion of a conflict between that and improvement is illusory. Quality assurance processes may find that in practice they are unable to encourage improvement while demanding compliance but these are not two ends of a single continuum but two distinct and only partly related dimensions. At the very least, we have a two-by-two grid of opportunities: compliance/non-compliance by improvement/non-improvement. Whether it is possible to have a set of quality assurance conditions that simultaneously encourages action in the upper-left quadrant is a moot point: but an irrelevant one. Compliance has nothing to do with improvement. Compliance may or may not lead to improvement in certain features of the higher education landscape, although being a holistic system it may result in deterioration elsewhere. Put another way, accountability is about value for money and demonstrating fitness for purpose, while continuous improvement in teaching and learning is about improvement of the student experience, and empowering students as lifelong learners.

Improvement is not something that is regulated but something that occurs through critical engagement. Accountability and improvement are not two related dimensions of quality, rather they are distinct and there is no intrinsic tension between them. Quality assurance has created an illusory tension by pretending that quality is intrinsically linked to the process of monitoring quality, an illusion that is exemplified in the 'fitness-for-purpose' approach. The illusory relationship between accountability/compliance and improvement evaporates when the focus is on the essential nature of quality itself.

2.3. The Disregard for the Essence of Quality

There is little theorising of quality in higher education. 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, have become the norm and this approach is applied irrespective of the purpose, rationale, object and focus of external evaluation. Phrases such as 'fitness for purpose', 'fitness of purpose', 'value for money', 'achieving excellence' are linked to quality in higher education, all purporting, in some way or another, to be definitions of a concept that, deep down, there appears to be a reluctance to define at all. Such definitions are without any solid theoretical framework. Quality as fitness for purpose, for example, is not a definition and lacks any theoretical or conceptual gravitas. Fitness for purpose, even if linked to a fitness of purpose, thus implying a non-trivial purpose, still fails to evoke the core concept of the concept of quality.

As a noun, quality implies élite status – 'The Quality' was a term used in Britain in the 19th century to refer to the upper class (Harvey and Green 1993). As an adjective, quality implies not just exclusivity, but goodness, desirability, even

reliability. In its adverbial form (qualitatively), quality is about change from one thing to another, about transformation; but more on process later.

The most famous 'quality' line in literature is Portia's in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "The quality of mercy is not strain'd".[6] Imagine that as: "The fitness for purpose of mercy is not strain'd"!

A quality is something we possess, something that also emanates from an object or service. We could, of course, deconstruct any object, service or person, for that matter, into a set of *qualities*: we could specify all the attributes that make the object of attention what it is. The more complex the object of attention, the longer and the more multidimensional is the list.

For example, we could describe the text of *The Merchant of Venice* by referring to the leather binding, the embossed gold-leaf title, the number and quality of the pages, the typeface. We could add to that the qualities of the content, the intricacies of the plot, the play with words, the characterisation, the ambiguity about racial discrimination, the effectiveness of the court scene. We could further elaborate its qualities by setting it in a wider context of the social context of the time it was written, or restrict the context to Elizabethan drama, or Shakespeare's own oeuvre; and by dint of so doing compare its qualities. We could endlessly undertake a reductionist analysis but, in the main, we do not. We home in on the core quality that makes the play so gratifying for us as readers, viewers or actors. It is not the reductionist list of qualities but a synthetic essence that conveys the quality of the play as a whole.

We do not explore whether *The Merchant of Venice* fits a purpose let alone specify the fitness of its purpose. Who is to specify the purpose? Us, the reader, Shakespeare, the writer, the director of the theatre that is putting on a production, the publisher of the text, a drama critic, a professor of Elizabethan drama? It makes no sense. Yet the play does have a purpose, or a set of purposes, that are context dependent: they are to entertain, amuse, inform, pose questions, challenge preconceptions or reproduce ideology. Given the complexity of purposes, the nonsense of attempting to specify the correctness of purpose is only outranked in its absurdity by the attempt to specify whether it fits said purposes. Who is to judge? Texts, as Umberto Eco argued (1979), do not exist in isolation with a fixed meaning. They are created as social objects through the role of the reader. Whatever the author intended is just one interpretation of the text.

If, then, it is a nonsense to talk of the fitness for purpose (let alone of purpose) of a single Shakespearean play, what then is the sense of applying this vague, untheorised concept to the complexity of a university? Taking the analogy of the role of the reader, a university is a text with many nuances and each participant is reading it in his or her own way, not least because they *are* the university. The university is not a thing but an ever-changing, multifaceted text that is being read and reread, not by policy makers but by the active participants. If we must adhere to the fitness-for-purpose definition, then every reader/participant has several purposes and everyone reflects on the fitness of each purpose in unique and dynamic ways. But that still misses the fundamental of quality.

Quality is about essence and transformation. It is about the dialectical process of deconstruction and reconstruction. Returning to Portia:

PORTIA: The quality of mercy is not strain'd,

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes

The throned monarch better than his crown;

His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;

But mercy is above this sceptred sway;

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,

It is an attribute to God himself;

And earthly power doth then show likest God's

When mercy seasons justice.[7]

This is an expression of the essential nature of mercy: not a definition, not an account of the purpose of mercy, not an attempt to measure mercy against some set of procedures. This is the core essential nub of the concept. And just as much as the play pivots around this essential moment, so an understanding of quality assurance revolves around the pivotal notion of quality as essence. This means that quality assurance needs to explore, dig down, to the essential quality of the programme or institution that it is reviewing: a mission-based, fitness-for-purpose checklist will not do.

But essence is not the goal of dialectical analysis. It is the key concept, the fulcrum around which pivots the deconstruction/reconstruction process of dialectical understanding (Marx 1975 (1887); Harvey 1990; Harvey and MacDonald 1993). The essential quality enables deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of an alternative understanding of the way in which the institution (teaching programme or research project) can fundamentally enable an improvement in the creative/learning process.

What does this mean in practice? A critical dialectical approach to quality evaluation begins with the idea that both the object of attention of the evaluation (the programme, subject area or institution) and the evaluation process itself are historically specific, situated in a holistic context and imbued with ideology. That is, the process evaluation and the object evaluated are not 'value neutral' nor apolitical, do not exist in isolation and do not transcend their historical setting. To understand the process of evaluation and thus to provide an evaluation of the object of study requires stripping away the surface appearance to reveal the ideology and to identify the essential nature of (in the case of the generalised evaluative process) the nature of quality and (in the case of the specific object under evaluation) its essential core. The essential core is determined through an iterative, dialectical process of shuttling

back and forth, conceptually, between the concept/object and the wider context, and between the present and the past.

It is precisely that dialectical process that leads to the conclusion that quality itself has been cloaked in an ideological gloss that transmuted it into quality process and that quality as concept requires reconstitution. In so doing, it was possible to identify an alternative understanding of the evaluative process: that it disregarded the creative process in favour of monitoring checklists.

This view suggests that evaluation against an agenda, whether that of the evaluating agency or of the future plans of the evaluated, fails to engage quality.

Quality as fitness for/of purpose deflects us from this dialectical discourse. The cynical view would be that that is precisely the purpose of fitness-for/of-purpose approaches: to conceal the decline of essential quality and to legitimate that decline. A less cynical approach might suggest that fitness for/of purpose is merely lazy pragmatism that ends up believing itself and cloaks transformation in procedures of accountability. As noted above, fitness for purpose is intrinsically linked as a definition of quality with the accountability approach to quality assurance. Indeed, fitness for purpose, as has been suggested, transmutes quality into quality assurance.

3. A RESEARCH-INFORMED, IMPROVEMENT-LED APPROACH TO QUALITY EVALUATION

Harvey and Newton (2004: 159) made a case for a research-based approach to quality evaluation and one that prioritised self-regulation. It was noted that:

> 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 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.

The proposal was to develop an approach that was reliant on research evidence; what works in the search for continuous improvement of learning and research but also what works in ensuring successful implementation of the improvement activities (Davies, Nutley, and Smith 2000; Newton 1999a, 1999b). There continues to be not only a paucity of evidence on impact but also on implementation.

Taking the case of the United Kingdom: an improvement-led approach is being increasingly reflected in developments in Scotland (QAA 2005) with the development of an 'enhancement-led institutional review' and in the rest of the United Kingdom through an increased emphasis, as was noted above, in the debate about 'enhancement' being given more emphasis than 'accountability' in a mature system where the perception is that accountability is well embedded (Williams 2002). Nonetheless, Brown (2002: 18) argued that while the forces of accountability are strong, "those devoted to improvement, including the promotion of innovation, are fragmented".

In essence, it is not just time for more evidence on the impact of higher education in order to critically evaluate whether the quality process hitherto has been

beneficial or insidious, it is also time to have research evidence underpin the
enhancement approach.

> 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, 2003), 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.
> (Harvey and Newton 2004: 159)

However, there remains a lack of clear evidence to guide improvement-led
approaches. Despite the declared intention of the British government to encourage
research-led policy, political imperatives often overwhelm research evidence to the
extent that one anonymous civil servant suggested that it is rather less evidence-
based policy than policy-based evidence that characterises government decision
making.

Nonetheless, the contention is that, at all levels – institutional, through national
to international – a research-informed 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 improvement
might work to the best advantage of all who have an interest in enhancing the
quality of learning and teaching.

To transform quality assurance in the direction of the improvement of the student
experience requires not just adjusted national systems but creating conditions for
bringing about sustained change and improvement in universities. This requires a
more sophisticated understanding of how higher education institutions work. It is
necessary to take account of lessons learned from the close-up study of academics
(Trowler 1998), especially studies of how front-line academics perceive, respond to,
and cope with, quality evaluation (Newton 2000, 2002b, 2003). Increasingly, micro
accounts of the nature of academic engagement with 'quality' are emerging that go
beyond the 'game-playing' and performance of staged review events (as reported
e.g. by Barrow 1999).

To fully understand what is involved in both 'quality evaluation' and 'quality
enhancement' it is, thus, necessary to deconstruct the implementation of quality
assurance processes within the wider context of the activities of academics, the
institutional framework, national frameworks and international developments.
Transforming quality evaluation involves understanding how academics and institu-
tions respond to quality evaluation, how institutions manage the quality improve-
ment enterprise, and how academics themselves engage with improvement practices.

This chapter reasserts the position that national quality evaluation bodies, as well
as institutions, have a responsibility to engage with a research-informed approach to
evaluation and improvement. Indeed, as has been shown, the more academic staff
engaged with national bodies, the less those bodies are associated by them with

'accountability', and the more they are seen as delivering improvement benefits for staff and students (Harvey 2002b; Morris 2003; Harvey and Newton 2004).

4. A FRAMEWORK FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF QUALITY EVALUATION

The underpinning principle of the transformation is to focus attention on the learner and the learning experience as well as the researcher and the creative research process. The position taken in this chapter remains as before:

> 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. (Harvey and Newton 2004: 161)

Academic communities and quality practitioners alike continue to take, rather than make, the quality agenda, especially where external audit and assessment are concerned. The proposed approach would reverse this trend and seek ways to empower practitioners to make the agenda. This position is also endorsed by D'Andrea (Chapter 9) and by Rosa and Amaral (Chapter 8).

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 framework is suggested (Figure 2), which draws on the model proposed in Harvey and Newton (2004).

The deconstruction, above, of the preponderant form of external quality assurance reveals how processes hijack and mystify quality as part of a politically motivated, ideological, compliance structure. It disempowers the academic community, forces them to respond to bureaucratic requirements, imposes judgments based on perfidious views and questionable performance indicators and stifles creativity to the extent that, as part of the academic process, 'quality' no longer has anything to do with academic endeavour: knowledge creation and student learning. (This is also a process often replicated at institutional level.)

Even improvement-led approaches remain imbued with an ideology that distrusts the academy. The alternative to the predominant approach (Figure 1), which is controlled top-down and by 'external' forces (be it an external agency or an external monitoring unit within an institution), is as follows:

First, the approach (Figure 2) is premised on the notion of self-regulation, is improvement-led, and is research-informed.

Second, although audit and external examining have potential for a research-informed approach (Figure 2), the proposed framework emphasises a research-informed perspective and capability, which is a dimension currently absent from external quality evaluation.

Third, as noted above, the object is the creative/improvement process itself: the learner and learner output or outcomes and the researcher and research outcomes. In short, the framework fixes on the transformative moment.[8]
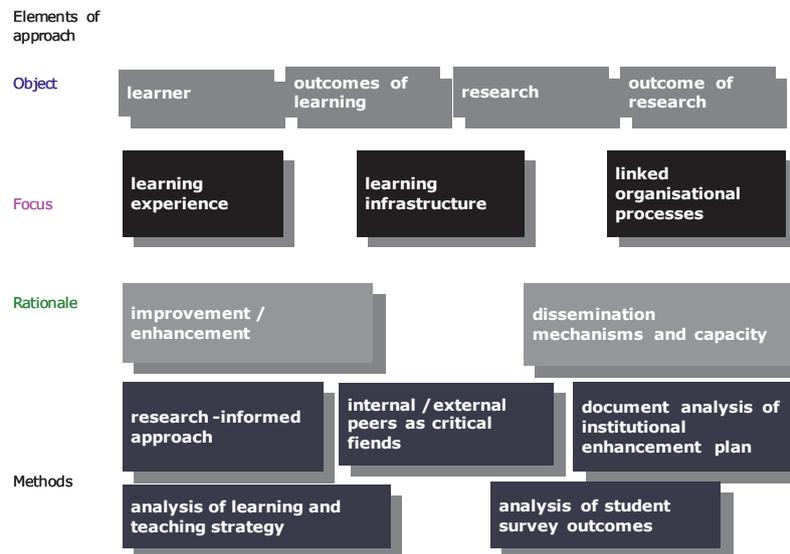
Elements of
approach

Object

| learner | outcomes of learning | research | outcome of research |

Focus

| learning experience | learning infrastructure | linked organisational processes |

Rationale

| improvement / enhancement | dissemination mechanisms and capacity |

Methods

| research -informed approach | internal / external peers as critical fiends | document analysis of institutional enhancement plan |
| analysis of learning and teaching strategy | analysis of student survey outcomes |

Figure 2. External evaluation: Alternative research-based framework. (Harvey and Newton 2004)

Fourth, the learning experience and learning environment, and any organisational processes that impinge upon them, provide a key focus for evaluation of the transformative process. Evaluation cannot be reduced into a checklist of individualised components, however overarching and far-reaching these may be. Thus, although the transformation process is enabled by:

- a shift from teaching to learning
- the development of graduate attributes
- the appropriateness of assessment
- a system for rewarding transformative teaching and learning facilitation
- providing transformative learning for academics
- an emphasis on pedagogy
- an institutional climate supportive of responsive collegiality
- establishing linkages between quality improvement and learning (Harvey 1997)

this is not a checklist that has to be accomplished. Transformation is a holistic process, not reducible to independent elements and the above are indicative of the institutional metamorphosis that is necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, to enable the transformative moment.

Fifth, the underpinning rationale is improvement and through a shift in discourse to improvement we can capture a deeper meaning, that of improving the critical creative/reflective process, that is at the heart of learning and knowledge creation. Here, in essence, the proposed framework is more insistent on improvement that enables the transformational moment, rather than improvement in more general terms.

Sixth, the compliance and verification elements of conventional forms of external quality evaluation are replaced by an improvement focus, since this is not a system for the inspection of provision. It was initially proposed that the focus of the improvement-led approach to external evaluation would not be provision but a university's 'institutional quality enhancement plan' or 'learning and teaching improvement strategy' (Figure 2), and its systems and mechanisms for the identi-fication and dissemination of good practice (Harvey and Newton 2004: 162). The revisited framework would, in the light of the deconstruction of the quality assurance process, prefer an evaluation process contingent on the pivotal creative moment. However, pragmatically, at least in the first stage of a shift to a research-informed improvement approach, it is probably necessary to concede an interim stage: the framing of an improvement agenda.

Seventh, the self-improvement agenda approach is premised on self-regulation. The institutional plan, or equivalent, would be used as the focal point for external quality monitoring, but on the basis of external input being that of a 'critical friend' or 'external consultant'. Elements of this are present in the approach adopted by the innovative "Joint Nordic Project", established through the Nordic Quality Assurance Network (NOQA) to promote best practice in quality enhancement, and which has made significant progress towards an open, genuinely interactive, and transparent approach to identifying good practice in improvement initiatives (Omar and Liuhanen 2005).

Eighth, as has been made clear throughout, a key requirement is 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. Mere 'amateur' opinion, based on cursory review of documentation or casual observation of facilities or even the learning process, will not provide adequate insights into the improvement agenda, let alone the transformative moment. Clearly, achieving the right specification for the kinds of expertise required entails further deliberation. However, given the growth of distinct 'communities of practice', in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, in 'quality enhancement' and 'pedagogic research' this does not present insurmountable challenges.

The key issue is what is the evidence that informs the evaluation?

> The [improvement] '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. (Harvey and Newton 2004: 162–163)

This may, at first glance, appear to be a rather subtle development over and above what external agencies currently require from institutions or subject groups. However, it privileges looking forward rather than back and requires the *evidence base* upon which forward planning is based. The upshot is an evaluation of planning proposal rather than an evaluation of provision per se. The original proposal noted two distinctive features of this framework.

> 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. (Harvey and Newton 2004: 163)

On the face of it, this still has two major drawbacks. The first is that the improvement-plan approach still places emphasis on bureaucratic compliance – albeit one that is more in the control of the institution or the academic group. The second drawback is that although the improvement-plan approach fits more readily with ongoing review and development processes it does not necessarily facilitate a deconstructive enquiry that explores the transformative moment. The improvement plan alone operates at a level above that of fundamental enquiry into how students learn, how researchers work and what could be done to improve the learning/creative moment (i.e. transformative moment).

However, the framework provides an entry into a more fundamental review of the transformative moment through its second feature: 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. The framework is also sufficiently flexible, potentially, to be able to accommodate other objectives relating, say, to employability, and how a university is addressing specific aspects of regional economic agendas.

In this respect, the evidence on the nature and practice of learning (and by extension research) communities provides an opportunity to explore and evaluate the transformative process.

So, in a nutshell, the proposal is for continuous forward planning supported by clear research-based evidence that the proposals would improve the transformative learning and knowledge creation process (the transformative moment). The key question for evaluators would be: How do you know that what you are planning to do in your setting is likely to improve how students learn or how researchers create knowledge?

This does not mean that each institution or group of academics has to answer this with fundamental research of their own. On the contrary, reinventing wheels should be kept to a minimum: there is more than enough 'not invented here' syndrome in the area of learning development. Harvey and Newton (2004: 164), for example, proposed "a searchable database" of "cases of good practice, worthy of dissemination". However, that does not mean that ready-made answers can be imported without consideration of the context into which they are going. Examples of ill-considered adoption of fads and fashions abound, from management practices, adoption of teaching techniques such as problem-based learning to installation of generic learning environments and the shift to semesterisation. None of these approaches solve anything per se. However, in the United Kingdom, for example, there is a wealth of information and practice on the improvement of the curriculum, assessment and the student experience within the new Higher Education Academy and its constituent elements (such as the LTSN Subject Centres and Generic Centre). A key consideration, therefore, is to use research to identify '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.

Finally, ninth, this improvement-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.

So, why should institutions take the not-inconsiderable step of adopting a research-based approach to improvement? At the moment they are investing considerable resources to comply with external requirements but with minimal and poorly targeted or documented pay-offs. Indeed, the UK Cabinet Office's Better Regulation Task Force, in its report "Higher Education: Easing the Burden" (2002: 7), indicated that "PA Consulting put the annual cost of what it referred to as the 'accountability burden' on HEIs at £250m". Moreover, in his discussion of quality assurance in higher education in Germany, Federkell (2005) points to the vast bureaucracy and cost of running even one cycle of programme accreditation in a higher education system that now has some 30,000 programmes. If each is subject to a three-day visit by a team of four reviewers the cost of the 360,000 reviewer days would be in the region of €250 million. In an accreditation system that is scheduled on a five-year cycle it is hardly surprising that Federkell reports that only 527 programmes have been accredited to date! Be that as it may, the general point is that the nature, extent and longevity of compliance-linked improvement are elusive and the resources expended tend to be written off or accounted for by short-term changes or dealing with reviewer comments, often at a senior level without impinging on the transformation at the learner/teacher or research interfaces. Expending effort on researching what is effective in transforming learning and research and linking it to improvement agendas is a more attractive use of resources, usually involving a longer term commitment but one with continuous improvement impact.

5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter fundamental questions have been posed about the nature and ubiquity of quality assurance, and also the essence of quality itself. It has been argued that quality assurance has thrived on the illusion that quality is intrinsically linked to regulatory frameworks and monitoring processes. The familiar debate around the assumed tension between 'accountability' and 'improvement' was revisited but the argument put forward here is that this tension is illusory and the frequently referred to dichotomy conceals as much as it reveals. The heart of the approach adopted here is a deconstruction of existing dominant approaches to quality assurance and a reconstruction of an alternative, research-informed approach.

There is an argument, perhaps, that the framework proposed here is only applicable to mature systems that have the accountability processes in place; indeed, that this process reflects heavily the UK environment. This is a moot point. The focus on the essential transformative nature of quality, rather than fitness-for-purpose glosses that conceal quality behind quality assurance processes, is something that can be applied in new systems. Indeed, the Swedish National Agency started out with an approach that privileged an audit of improvement processes but was inter alia distrusted by politicians who wanted more ostensive accountability and forced a change of direction.

The original paper summarised the approach thus:

> 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. (Harvey and Newton 2004: 163)

While the above still obtains as a medium to facilitate the review process, the revised approach makes a more fundamental contribution to the debate about quality evaluation. It places even more emphasis on grasping the essential quality of a programme, research project or institution and identifying the means, informed by research, to ensure improvement of the learning and creative process.

It is acknowledged that there remain as yet unresolved questions around how the approach outlined here might be operationalised, and the circumstances and driving forces which could lead to its adoption. These issues are recognised as needing consideration and further work, though they remain beyond the scope of this present chapter. The purpose of this chapter has been to identify the nature and shape of a paradigm shift which many involved in the quality evaluation debate increasingly recognise as being desirable.

NOTES

1 In some countries, notably the United Kingdom, the term enhancement has grown up as an alternative to improvement. In practice, the two terms are used interchangeably. To improve means to make things better or to ameliorate. To enhance means to make larger, clearer or more attractive. Enhancement, thus, has connotations of changing appearance, making quality look better, whereas improvement has connotations of delivering a better service. In that case this chapter prefers the term improvement and uses that except where referring to use made by others of the term enhancement.

2 The original paper (Harvey and Newton 2004) undertook a review and critique of existing systems of higher education quality review. It mapped the approach, object, focus, rationale and methods of existing approaches to quality assurance. It noted that accountability, compliance and, in some countries, control are much more frequent rationales for external monitoring than improvement. The paper argued for more evidence-based research to inform quality evaluation policy, although noting a relative paucity of research, especially on impact. The paper had, as its clarion call, the assertion that "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". The paper raised fundamental questions about both impact and the methodology for assessing impact. It asked "What is the evidence of the impact of quality assurance on higher education quality?" and suggested that there was a lack of serious independent research on impact and that what there was brought into question inquisitorial approaches to quality assurance. It argued that transformation of quality assurance is necessary to ensure that quality assurance is itself a transforming process for those involved in the student learning experience and proposed a model for the transformation of external quality evaluation.

3 Quality assurance used to have a narrower meaning, referring principally to auditing processes rather than assessment, accreditation or standards checking, but since most of these processes in practice tend to use much the same methods, the term assurance has become a catch-all term. In some writings, this term has been replaced by 'monitoring' to encompass the variety of procedures (see Harvey 2004–2005). It is notable that the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education includes agencies that undertake assurance, assessment and accreditation.

4 Harvey and Newton (2004) explore this initial 'model' in much greater detail.

5 Much of the remainder of this section draws on the discussion of accountability in the *Analytic Quality Glossary* (Harvey 2004–2005).

6 Strain'd in this quote is short for constrained, that is, there are no constraints on the quality of mercy.

7 Portia is telling Shylock (the moneylender who wants his pound of flesh) that mercy must be freely given, and is inviting him to show mercy to the merchant.

8 Moment, in this sense, refers not so much to an instant of time but a particular point in time when the physical notion of 'moment' (the engagement and impact of forces) and the consequential notion of moment (having important effects or influence) are combined into a momentous event of engagement and critical reflection and reconceptualisation. Thus a transformative process, changing one's understanding, manifests in self-realisation or a research output.

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