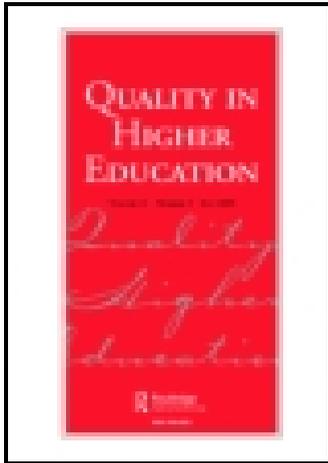


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EDITORIAL

Fifteen Years of *Quality in Higher Education* (Part Two)

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ABSTRACT *This is the second part of the review of the papers published in Quality in Higher Education from its inception in 1995 to the present day. This part of the review focuses on internal quality assurance, improvements in learning and teaching and assessments of the impact of quality assurance. In doing so, the review also examines papers about quality enhancement instruments such as student feedback surveys, which have played an increasingly prominent role in quality processes since the early 1990s. The review suggests that quality assurance has resulted in clearer documentation and transparency although external processes could be better aligned to everyday academic activity. Quality assurance has become an international concern and procedures have become increasingly standardised across national boundaries. Significantly, the consumerist approach to higher education quality that is driven by governments and senior management, has not met with enthusiasm from contributors to the journal and there appears to be a strong commitment to autonomy and academic freedom. However, papers indicate that academia is prone to inertia and compliant indifference. Ultimately, the review suggests that it is still not clear that, even after 15 years, quality assurance systems have really enhanced higher education.*

Introduction

This second part of the review of the papers published in *Quality in Higher Education* over the last 15 years focuses on internal quality assurance, improvements in learning and teaching and assessments of the impact of quality assurance.

PART TWO

Internal quality assurance

Meade (1995) outlined the systematic quality improvement of one Australian university, which included developing a continuous quality-improvement management plan, devolving responsibility for quality advancement to faculties and improving documentation of procedures and outcomes. As a learning organisation the university developed: leadership positions to support quality management; committees, discussion forums and publications;

evaluation, monitoring and development; benchmarking and networking. Meade outlined barriers to implementation and strategies to overcome them, with a view to working with staff to establish a 'learning culture'.

Weusthof (1995) reported a research project on internal quality assurance in Dutch universities. The focus was on the nature of self-evaluation and the way results are utilised at faculty level as well as assessing factors that influence internal quality assurance at the faculty level. He argued that the emphasis in the further implementation of the Dutch quality assurance system should not be predominantly on external demands but, rather, should be focused at improving the self-evaluation procedure. This would serve to increase faculty autonomy (which the government wanted) as well as aid improvement of educational quality.

Horsburgh (1998) examined the internal quality monitoring processes in two institutions (one in New Zealand and one in the UK) to consider how these processes may be contributing to transformation. She concluded that emphasis needs to be given to self-regulation and innovation, in particular through delegating responsibility for quality to teaching teams and fostering improvement processes. Barrow and Curzon-Hobson (2003) reported how a New Zealand polytechnic, UNITEC, attempted to shift from seeing quality as systems compliance to seeing it as about personal care and individual responsibility aimed at making a real difference in classrooms. A set of 'quality principles' were developed to replace comprehensive standards and processes specified in the existing quality management system. Staff were encouraged to develop tailored processes, through controlled pilots, rather than unthinkingly implementing pre-defined institutional procedures. A more recent approach in New Zealand argued for an alternative approach to quality assurance in universities that locates evaluation not with external auditors but with members of the teaching team (Jordens & Zepke, 2009). They proposed a critically reflective model of curriculum and programme quality assessment situated within communities of practice, which would result in recommendations that are more likely to be positively implemented than current methods and hence lead to quality enhancement more rapidly.

Coyle (2003) described the evolution of a quality management system at London Guildhall University in the UK. He examined the role of self-evaluation in periodic reviews of departments, the use of customer-centred approaches, the use of knowledge-management techniques and the anticipation of risks. These elements were considered alongside the autonomy and accountability of the university's constituent departments. The potential rewards of a self-evaluative approach are considered to arise from the consequent academic debate. However, experience showed a tension between the use of honest and open self-criticism for the purpose of continuous improvement and the use of those self-assessments in a potentially critical public report prepared by an external agency.

Connolly, Jones and O'Shea (2005) described one university's experience in quality assuring higher education courses that were to be delivered by e-, or blended, learning. They described a four-phase model of quality assurance specifically designed to ensure that the quality of the new forms of delivery was as robust and rigorous as that of the more traditional face-to-face delivery methods. Three issues arose: the pedagogic model underpinning the experience; the coherence of the material placed on the web; and the support for students. The quality assurance system required that, in addition to the standard programme document, information should be prepared about how students use the respective module packs, have access to learning resources facilities and have access to e-mail support and discussion groups. Reflecting upon the efficacy of the new approach they noted that the university's model of quality assurance for e-learning does not conform entirely to Harvey and Knight's (1996) model of empowerment. Nonetheless, many of the

central tenets of the model of empowerment are central components of the university's model as students are offered a lot of control over their learning and students' critical abilities are being developed through the pedagogical model of e-learning.

Gynnild (2007) examined an external evaluation of the quality assurance system at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) conducted by The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NOKUT). The external audit report along with internal reports provided by the seven faculties of the university served as the major data sources for the study. The quality assurance system, which was approved by NOKUT, serves as an example of how the university falls short in producing data to systematically improve student learning. Systematic follow-ups to verify the effects of the quality assurance system could have sparked discussions, not only about the structure of the quality system but also what quality learning means and how it can be promoted.

Martín (2006) assessed the teaching and the research performance of the departments of the University of Zaragoza (Spain) and reviewed the strengths and weaknesses. He suggested several initiatives aimed at improving departmental performance in the light of the current Spanish higher education reform. Bender and Siller (2006) explored how an engineering college in the US used a university's quality enhancement system to generate and manage evidence for multiple accreditation and accountability bodies. They argued that a programme is better able to ensure the ownership, development and integrity of and research into its own curriculum if it has a centralised university improvement system that presents unit-level quality management research to external market and accountability groups. Duening and Kadipasaoglu (1996) reported a team-driven improvement effort of the MBA admissions process at a US institution. Three principles were essential to the success of the team effort: dialogue, enjoyment and trust.

Churchman and Woodhouse (1999) raised the issue of professional education. They indicated that many stakeholders have an interest in professional education and that there are differences in perspective that result in some tension. They argued that interaction between government agencies and the professional schools is largely mediated through professional, regulatory and statutory bodies in New Zealand. They concluded that the studies examined suggest that professional statutory bodies must recognise tertiary institutions' capacity to undertake a constantly self-critical approach with their own internal quality assurance processes, which are based on broad tertiary education processes and research. However, tertiary institutions need to respect the responsibilities of the professional statutory bodies to protect the interests of consumers of professional services.

Jones (2003) suggested that there are various ways to see quality in higher education and argued that what is needed is integration such that quality improvements at the educational-delivery level complement and are reflected at the university level, with qualitative information from the decentralised units of the university adding a fullness to quantitative data collected at the central level. Several papers suggested new implementation models (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005) and holistic models (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2005). Stensaker (2008) argued that the whole field of quality assurance would benefit by creating a more realistic picture of how organisational change takes place.

The limited number of papers on internal quality assurance demonstrates how the quality debate has been dominated by the activities of external agencies. However, the papers above reinforce how important internal processes are and how, ultimately, it is what goes on routinely in institutions that impacts on quality. In that vein, the contributions on the quality of learning and teaching below provide further insights into the internal improvement process.

Academic Resistance: Ritual and Burden

Throughout the 15 years of *Quality in Higher Education* there have been repeated concerns about the artificiality of quality assurance processes in higher education. For many academics, they are seen as a burdensome extra, to be responded to through ritualised compliance. Quality assurance fails to be a part of the everyday activity of academics because they perceive no real link between the quality of their academic work (teaching and research) and the performance embodied in quality assurance processes.

Barrow (1999) showed how quality management in New Zealand polytechnics was considered as an instrument of governmentality developed to ensure the surveillance of the work of academic staff in an educational institution. It is suggested that this surveillance has not led to an improvement in quality or to institutional definitions of quality being realised; rather, it has led to a degree of performance in peer review events, or dramaturgical compliance, as he referred to it.

In his much-quoted contribution, entitled 'Feeding the beast or improving quality?', Newton (2000) examined academics' perceptions of quality assurance. Hitherto, research to explain academics' responses to the growth of external quality monitoring and the extension of institutions' own quality systems had been sparse. His case study highlighted not only the merits of close-up study but showed the 'implementation gap' between the intentions underpinning 'quality policy' and the actual outcomes. He argued that if academics are to remain pivotal in efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning, then more attention needs to be paid, by institutions and external quality bodies, to the importance of the conditions and context of academics' work. Otherwise, quality monitoring is liable to be invested with a 'beast-like' presence requiring to be 'fed' with ritualistic practices by academics seeking to meet accountability requirements.

A follow-up contribution (Newton, 2002) reported the second phase of a longitudinal study of academics' perceptions of quality assurance. He examined whether quality monitoring had led to improvement, or whether it resulted in sterile and ritualistic game-playing, with performances and impression management carefully designed to fulfil the requirements of quality assurance and monitoring processes. He distinguished between the dominant 'formal' meanings of quality prevalent in the early 1990s and the 'situated' perceptions of academics working with quality systems on a day-to-day basis. Findings provided evidence that staff, especially front-line academics, do not mutely accept change or the particular demands of quality assurance policy or systems. Policy implementation is complex and uneven. Academic staff, in common with all actors involved, are 'makers' and 'shapers' of policy. They respond, adapt to or even resist in a variety of ways and, while this may be patterned, it is not uniform. What is beyond doubt is that they are active not passive participants in the policy process.

Anderson (2006) followed this up and showed that academics, although committed to quality in research and teaching, continue to resist quality assurance processes within their universities. This apparent paradox reflects a series of disputes surrounding issues of power, definition and efficacy. Reporting a study of academics from 10 Australian universities, she argued that until university management, university quality agencies and academic staff in universities draw on mutually agreed understandings of the contested concept of 'quality', academics will continue to resist quality processes, treating them as games to be played and systems to be fed.

Minelli, Rebora and Turri (2008) discussed the authors' fear of the potential failure of evaluation in Italian universities and showed how it risks slipping towards ritual

behaviour. Their empirical study showed a disinclination to use evaluation output within the institution, the presence of conflicts of interest among evaluators and the limited scope of the methodologies used for producing effective evaluation output.

Watty (2003) had noted that previous research provides evidence of grassroots academics adopting a variety of behaviours in response to quality-led change initiatives in higher education. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that this is likely to change in the future. Although administrators may seek answers to the question of when academics will learn about quality, perhaps there is a need to address a more fundamental question: 'How do academics conceive quality in higher education?' Perhaps academics conceive quality differently to these other stakeholders, valuing different aspects to those measured and monitored by external agencies. If so, academics need to articulate, preferably as a unified voice, how they conceive quality. A lack of consensus over quality impacts on the future direction of higher education and diminishes the transformative potential of quality in higher education. In a later paper, Watty (2006) asked academics from 39 accounting departments in Australian universities about quality and found an overall view that quality in accounting education had declined.

In a South African study, Jacobs and Du Toit (2006) explored changes, five years later, in the views of six faculty quality committees at a university. The study examined the extent to which these committees perceived: quality improvement as an indicator of faculty effectiveness; and faculties as the owners of quality. Besides a far greater awareness of quality promotion, the committees also realised that quality must be shown to exist and that the processes of quality improvement are important. However, five years since their inception, most quality committees still viewed quality as 'something that exists out there'.

The evidence of staff resistance is reflected in differences in organisational culture. Kleijnen, Dolmans, Muijtjens, Willems and Van Hout (2009) explored staff members' perceptions about organisational culture. Their assessment involved 18 different departments within Dutch Universities of Applied Science. The results demonstrated that both a flexibility and control-oriented culture were moderately experienced in practice. In addition, staff members in general prefer a flexibility-oriented culture to a control-oriented culture. In many departments, the organisational culture was not in line with the staff members' preferences.

For Gosling and D'Andrea (2001), the problem lay in the separation of quality assurance and educational development. They observed that despite the enormous growth in national quality assurance processes in the UK, serious doubts remained about their effectiveness in achieving lasting quality improvement. They suggested that the quality of students' experience of higher education can more effectively be improved by combining educational development with quality assurance to create a more holistic approach. They regarded the typical separation of 'educational development' units and quality assurance offices as counterproductive as they have competing improvement agendas based on often opposing values. Essentially, they wanted to replace a 'name and shame' approach, which is the consequence of quality assurance, with ongoing continuous improvement through a devolved integrated educational development model.

Learning and teaching quality

From the first issue, there has been a consistent concern about quality of teaching and learning, not least the relationship between quality assurance and the assessment of pedagogy.

Assessing Teaching Quality

There were several articles that suggested how teaching quality might be assessed; Bitzer and Malherbe (1995) suggested practical guidelines and perspectives based on the South African experience and Teerajarmorn, Jamornmann and Rowlinson (2003) reported research from Thailand on a way of scoring university instructors' performance that reflected quality as well as quantity. Apart from rating staff performance, the intention was to use the tool to aid the improvement of teaching quality.

Lomas and Nicholls (2005) examined, in a pre-1992 university in England, the introduction of peer review of teaching, which they claimed was seen as a quality enhancement rather than a quality assurance instrument. However, where peer review of teaching is viewed as an external imposition, universities face the major challenge of changing organisational culture. Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004) examined some of the ways in which the UK's subject review could contribute to the scholarship of teaching. They saw subject reviews as useful in principle. However, an analysis of 162 institutional reports covering business and management provision concluded that, while 'fitness for purpose' was the explicit criterion for judging institutional standards, in practice, reviewers were guided by a series of implicit evaluative principles based on preconceptions about 'teaching excellence'.

Douglas and Douglas (2006) had compared student feedback questionnaires, peer review and the potential use of mystery students as a means of evaluating the quality of teaching and learning and for providing a vehicle for continuous improvement. Their UK-based study showed that staff have very little faith in student feedback questionnaires, whether module or institutional, participate (sometimes reluctantly) in the school's peer review scheme and are divided on the potential use of mystery students.

McMillan and Parker (2005) outlined a mentoring programme in health sciences in South Africa and explored how it might be evaluated. They concluded that both qualitative and quantitative research approaches are a prerequisite to an inquiry into the quality of mentoring programmes, although qualitative data (semi-structured interview responses), seeking knowledge through understanding the wider context within which the programme is located, may be more useful than quantitative evidence (student marks on the year-end schedule) in attributing success to, or measuring the quality of, a programme.

Staff Development

Lueddeke (1997) discussed the establishment of units whose aim is the promotion of quality teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Using the unit at Bradford University as an example he concluded by indicating a need to consider 'value-added' and multi-dimensional strategies or approaches to change if mainstream academics are to play a central role in educational reforms and thus become more closely aligned with teaching quality and innovation. Imrie (1998) addressed the teaching professionalism of academic staff. Quality, he claimed, is linked to care and quality assurance to the effectiveness of institutional processes.

Karpiak (2000) argued that many higher education systems are staffed by an ageing teaching force and the implications for quality in the present and the medium term have been insufficiently appreciated. Based on a study in a Canadian university she suggested that there are implications for the ways in which higher education institutions operate, not least the development of a collegial, caring environment that is supportive of the external demands placed on midlife staff. Academics need to be encouraged to explore new areas, new orientation and new avenues for broadening their perspectives. Good individual

review, mentoring and appraisal practices decoupled from the high-stakes, summative accountability are important. A university that ignores such possibilities risks serious problems with the quality of the work of its largest group of academic staff and passes up the opportunity to make the most of the experience of this group.

Knight (2006) claimed that enhancement of teaching quality is a complex job because learning to teach is usually not a formal process: practice-based, on-the-job learning is more significant. Thus, he argued, enhancing the quality of teaching implies the creation of working environments that favour professional formation and a different way of thinking about professional development.

These papers suggest that staff development is about developing an appropriate caring and encouraging environment rather more than it is about providing training.

Reward and Recognition

Teaching continues to be held in much lower esteem than research in universities and promotion is usually linked to research profile, which does not encourage efforts to improve the quality of teaching.

Wahlén (2002) argued for the recognition of teaching skills versus other qualifications when appointing and rewarding academic staff. In the light of changing conditions for universities, increasing numbers of students and widened participation, there is a need for a better understanding and appreciation of skills related to teaching and support of learning in order to maintain the quality of higher education. He argued that unless these aspects of university teachers' work are seriously assessed and recognised when hiring, promoting and rewarding academic staff, higher education institutions run the risk of diminishing the quality of their provision.

Robertson (2002) similarly argued that the setting of policies in Australian higher education tends to ignore the concerns of those who appear to have the least opportunity to speak: the teaching academics and students. She noted that, in the midst of changing university cultures, departmental leadership is important. Managerial culture militates against improved learning outcomes, not least because disengaged managers fail to communicate with staff, which leads to discontent, feelings of powerlessness and job alienation. It is necessary to enable, encourage and reward students and staff for 'having a go'. In essence, the knowledge workers need to regain some leadership to restore optimism and a voice for themselves and their students in the political decision-making of the university.

Wellbeing

A related issue is the stress that staff in higher education appear increasingly to be experiencing.

Kinman and Jones (2003) examined the under-researched area of stressors and strains in UK academics. Their study of almost 800 academics showed job stress and demands have increased significantly in recent years and job satisfaction and levels of support have declined. Several stressors were identified that are not only characteristics of the organisational climate but also features of national educational policy. High levels of psychological distress were found in comparison with academics in other countries and with other professional groups and the general population in the UK. Perceptions of work-home conflict had particularly strong relationships with psychological distress and job dissatisfaction. Few academic institutions appeared to offer either stress management sessions or counselling to

their employees and although a significant proportion of respondents indicated interest in such interventions, very few had actually participated in any form of counselling.

Kinman, Jones and Kinman (2006), in a follow-up paper, compared the findings of two studies, conducted in 1998 and 2004, of academic staff in British universities. The findings indicate that: there has been little change in the levels of most stressors experienced over the six-year period; the high levels of psychological distress found in the 1998 study are undiminished and continue to exceed those of other professional groups and the population generally; and the majority of the health and safety at work standards are not met. They concluded that the findings have important implications for national and institutional policy for UK higher education. The sector has long enjoyed a reputation for the high quality of its provision. Higher education is a labour-intensive industry that relies heavily upon the capabilities and goodwill of its employees to provide such quality. In circumstances where institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit, retain and nurture suitably qualified academic staff, that reputation could be at risk. Some of the reported problems could be addressed at the institutional level but national initiatives are probably necessary if the underlying malaise is to be addressed.

Edwards (2009) noted that previous research suggests that higher education employees experience comparatively high levels of job stress. A range of instruments, both generic and job-specific, has been used to measure stressors and strains. He outlined another tool, the Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) scale, which is a measure designed to capture perceptions of the working environment and employees' responses to them. A survey using WRQoL collected data from 2136 workers in four higher education institutions in the UK. The study confirmed the viability of the instrument and showed that, overall, higher education employees are dissatisfied with their jobs and careers, are generally dissatisfied with working conditions and control at work and report they are stressed at work.

Improving the Quality of Education

Shabani (1995) argued that the quality of training provided by African universities has deteriorated. He analysed the main causes of this situation and proposed a series of strategies that are likely to help improve the quality of university education in Africa, including: selective admission, as universities should not accept more students than their capacity can hold; enable student feedback on the pedagogical skills of lecturers, the quality of their syllabi and on the effectiveness of the teaching methods used; encourage highly qualified lecturers with adequate pedagogical skills and experience to write scientific manuals; and improvement of the quality of graduate training.

Fourie and Alt (2000) discussed the challenges to sustain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in South African universities against the background of the latest quality assurance policy developments at the national level. They argued for a shift to an improvement-led culture, although admitting this is a substantial task, inhibited by various factors that interfere with academic staff's willingness and ability to respond to the quality agenda. More of a concern is that academic staff become occupied by building and conforming to formal quality assurance procedures and divert attention from teaching and research. Thus, quality assurance that is not integrated into the core activities of academic staff, such as programme planning and development and professional growth and development, may harm quality.

Ralph and Konchak (1996) used their study of orthodontic education in seven dental schools across Canada to provide suggestions for improving the quality of teaching,

including more collaboration among the various stakeholders and more clinical experience for students. A decade later, Bolander, Josephson, Mannand and Lonka (2006) reported an investigation of the relationship between the learning outcomes expressed in the core medical curriculum at a Swedish university and how these were interpreted by and related to, teachers' teaching goals. A key element is that involvement in design and review is important for teachers' interpretations of the core curriculum. However, it is not realistic that everyone should be involved in every bit of design. Teachers need, though, to recognise their own role in relation to implementation of the core curriculum, as well as being involved in the process of updating the core curriculum.

Foo and Ng (1996), following a study at Nanyang Technological University, provided guidelines to improve study methods of computer engineering undergraduates, who had exhibited a tendency to rote-learning strategies to minimally meet course requirements. The approach requires commitment from administrators and lecturers who are also proficient in counselling skills and study skills support. A strong rapport between students and lecturers is also needed to build up a level of trust so that effective advice and counselling can take place. Harris and Bretag (2003) presented an example from Australia of a cycle of reflection and revision used to involve students and teaching staff in the development of curriculum and teaching methods, with a resultant increase in quality learning outcomes. They also reported an increased emphasis on collaborative teaching alongside the introduction of integrated communication skills.

Hansen and Jackson (1996) reported the application of total quality improvement to an undergraduate economics course. They argued that most of the quality movement in higher education focuses on improving management. The challenge for a lecturer is to help students develop their potential by focusing on learning outcomes, student involvement and continuous improvement of the programme via student feedback, notwithstanding that Douglas and Douglas (2006) had been sceptical about staff responses to student survey results.

The quality reform of higher education in Norway has generally recommended a substitution of classroom teaching with more active forms of learning. However, Fallan (2006) concluded that this may disregard student personality, which his study showed affects both the most effective mode of learning and even the student's selection of major areas of study. Thus, simply moving to active learning may not suit all types of students. A review of an embryonic quality process at the University of Vilnius revealed that too much emphasis was placed on lectures (Venngis, 1997).

Improvement in teaching also has curriculum design implications. Zepke (1998) predicted that developments in information technology will have a major impact on teaching and learning in higher education. He explored curriculum design issues that underpin learning and teaching on the Internet and suggested design guidelines based on practical experience. Johansen (2007) argued that a critical look at the content we select for teaching and the criteria for that selection may help us to establish a theoretical framework for studying the quality of teaching and learning. The discussion of such criteria is central to the German and Nordic *didaktik* tradition. The criteria for content selection reveal how educational content is related to student learning and how the teacher appears a mediator of that relation. It reveals a distinction between an academic discipline and its corresponding educational content and between knowing that subject matter and teaching it. Research designs founded on such a theoretical framework may contribute significantly to facilitate bottom-up studies of educational quality for the benefit of academic staff as well as for administrators and quality agencies. It can throw light on the

development of written curricula and standards as well as on day-to-day teaching in our institutions.

However, there are a couple of shadows over the improvement of pedagogy. The first is that students are becoming more instrumental in their approach to higher education. The last 30 years has seen a shift towards pragmatism among students when it comes to attending lectures. Dolnicar (2005) undertook an empirical study to gain understanding about undergraduate student motivations and found that 'idealists', mature, often arts-based students with working experience, genuinely enjoyed lectures, whereas 'pragmatics', younger students in commerce, attended lectures to get the information they needed to succeed in the subject. The pragmatists had the lowest lecture attendance but achieved the highest grade-point average.

The second is the apparent teaching overload of staff in higher education. At the start of the decade, McInnis (2000) reported a national survey of academics in Australian universities that suggested that changing work practices to improve the quality of teaching would be difficult. Work-role problems are not experienced in the same way by academics at different ages and career stages, or indeed, in different institutions and disciplinary fields. This diversity, he claimed, presents a major difficulty for national and institutional efforts aimed at addressing the growing problems associated with changes in academic work. The paper suggested that academic workloads and work roles have reached a critical point and nothing short of major reform will be adequate if efforts to improve the quality of teaching are to be achieved. Academic staff then have to think about how they apportion their time. Menon (2003) showed that, in Cyprus, teaching-focused academics are more likely than research-focused academics to emphasise the benefits associated with the teaching and vocational aspects of higher education. Her study revealed that teaching-focused academics place greater emphasis on the importance of higher education for the development of the student, which has implications for attempts to improve the quality of teaching and research at universities.

A third cloud is the growing numbers of students in classes. Based on a study of seven years of data from an English university covering 31 subject areas, Fearnly (1995) showed that that, across the majority of the subject areas, performance declines as the number of students recruited onto the module increases. Since then, there have been large increases in student numbers, which has put pressure on innovative learning and teaching. In many settings, the increasing workload and student numbers have led to a reversion to mass lecturing.

Assessment of Students

A dozen articles addressed assessment of student learning, which it was proposed constitutes a very important element of the quality of the student experience. In essence, the contributions argued for a shift from traditional method-led examination-oriented systems to motivational and transparent assessment that directly tested specified learning outcomes. More effort and resources should be directed at staff development enabling and encouraging appropriate assessment practices.

In the first volume, Erwin and Knight (1995), drawing on practice in the US and in the UK, argued that indifferent assessment arrangements can poison otherwise well-conceived curricula. They identified characteristics of formative and summative assessment arrangements that support good quality learning, while observing that common practice in the US and in the UK falls short of these ideals. They proposed, *inter alia*, that a quality assessment

system should: have clear curriculum aims; ensure assessment criteria are understood by staff and students; assess a range of learning outcomes, both subject-specific and generic; have valid measures of the intended learning outcomes; have multiple assessment methods where there are multiple programme aims; ensure that students get useful feedback on their work; make learning programmes, aims, criteria and outcomes public; and use assessment data in programme review and resourcing decisions.

Hinett (1995) reflected these concerns in her examination of how assessment (grading) shapes the student experience. She asked how assessment can facilitate flexible learning in a system of mass higher education and challenged pedagogic assumptions about the value of content-driven syllabi. Drawing on a study at the University of Central Lancashire, UK and at Alverno College, USA, she illustrated how students regard assessment as central to their educational experience. The increasingly heterogeneous student body in many institutions requires a deconstruction of traditional assessment methods to make it student-centred. Existing paradigms that see assessment as something separate from learning promote instrumentalism. As a result students are likely to be less confident and less able to articulate themselves to employers and are less likely to have the ability to self-evaluate. Change requires an assessment system that is flexible, responsive, student-centred and entrenched in the learning experience. Five years on, Hinett and Weeden (2000) focused on a specific issue and asked how we help trainee teachers make judgements about the quality of the work of their pupils. Using a case study, they argued that self- and peer-assessment activities can help trainee teachers to understand the requirements of formal assessments by helping them develop and practise making qualitative judgements. Self- and peer-assessment integrated into programmes can improve confidence, motivation to learn and increase ownership of subject content. They recommended that staff considering implementing self- and peer-assessment develop: a clear exposition of the aims and objectives of the programme of study; a rationale for the introduction of such activities; small and realistic goals that are achievable; and a willingness to experiment.

Lauvas, Havnes and Raaheim (2000) also argued that it is essential to introduce alternatives to the traditional assessment approaches in Norway. However, given the presumption of examination, the continuing concern to introduce alternatives has been unsuccessful. They argued, thus, that the focus should be on the basis for selecting appropriate assessment methods, rather than on the methods themselves.

A study by Mcdowell and Sambell (1999) showed that students identify a range of educational purposes for assessment and make judgements about how well purposes are met. Students judge assessment against the following criteria: the effects it has on learning and motivation; the extent of openness and clarity; the feedback and guidance provided; and the content, form and accuracy of the assessment and its feasibility.

There was a small array of other focused studies relating to assessment. Wolffe, Defesche and Lans (1999) reported research into the factors that facilitate learning among first- and second-year students at the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology. Price and Rust (1999) noted growing pressure both within and across institutions in the UK to establish common assessment standards. They reported the introduction of a common assessment grid in a School of Business, which, in the event, failed to provide comprehensive marking criteria. In a small-scale study, Kangis (2001) found that using different font sizes and line spacing seemed to affect grades awarded to student work. Assignments presented in font size 12 were awarded higher marks than those presented in size 10. Also, those with 1.5 spacing between lines were awarded higher marks than those in single

spacing. Type of font and justification were not significant. These findings, potentially, have implications for students' academic status.

Greatorex (1999) reported how the UK Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) awards academic credits for achievement at different levels but argued that empirical data showed a lack of comparable notions of levels across both institutions and disciplines and a lack of linear progression through these levels. In a somewhat related micro-study, Lavelle (2003) studied differences in the quality of US university student writing as reflected in early writing by students (first- or second-year) and later writing (third or final years). There were no significant differences in the quality of writing between early and late samples and no significant relationships between grade-point average and writing quality.

A couple of studies examined competence-based assessment and portfolios. Using architectural education in Asia as a case study, Thilakaratne and Kvan (2006) investigated the appropriateness of the widespread use of competence-based assessment in professional education. They concluded that competence-based assessment should focus on learning and instruction not be limited to occupational performance and should assess the development of 'soft' as well as 'hard' competencies. Further, assessment criteria should be based on appropriate benchmarking and not on minimum standards as currently practised. Van Tartwijk, Driessen, Van Der Vleuten and Stokking (2007) explored the introduction of portfolios, which are intended to evaluate competence development. Factors that influence successful introduction are the match between the purpose and the content and structure of the portfolio; the educational configuration in which the portfolio is introduced; the support of teachers, students and educational leaders; and the availability of an adequate infrastructure.

In a seminal paper, Knight (2002) explored the dependability of assessments of student achievement when used as performance indicators for internal and external quality monitoring. He identified problems that jeopardise attempts to monitor, control and enhance quality in higher education. He argued that reliable national data about complex student achievements are not to be had. This means that reliance on external quality assurance is unwise and that more attention should be paid to internal quality enhancement.

The issue of external examining was addressed in three papers. Warren Piper (1995) drew on an Australian and a UK study of external examination practice and discussed external examiners' purpose and function, disposition, contribution to the technical soundness of examinations and role in the examination board. He suggested that these purposes can be mutually exclusive and result in an incoherent system. For example, signing the results could be construed as the examiner testifying that they personally agreed with the results; that the results were those agreed by the board, irrespective of the external's view; that the board's affairs had been conducted according to regulation. He concluded that university teachers would benefit from receiving a well-founded professional education in the technical matters of teaching and examining. The most significant benefit of the external examiner system is that it constitutes a conference, in some cases the only conference, in which academics discuss educational issues related to their discipline area.

However, Gaunt (1999) argued that the external examiner system in higher education in the UK has come under increasing scrutiny as growth of the sector has led to a demand for greater public accountability. She examined the role of external examiners in a new university that has a substantial proportion of professional courses. These examiners saw their role as maintaining standards and ensuring that students were able to make the link between theory and the demands of current practice. An apparent shift from moderator to course

consultant had taken place in most cases. Unlike examiners on academic courses, the majority visited the course during the year and met students as part of the examination process. In the context of debates on graduate standards and the changing nature of employment, expanding the representation of practitioners in the external examining system would emphasise the role of higher education in the economy.

Gynnild, Myrhaug and Lian (2004) pointed out that Norway had a long tradition of using external examiners during examinations and grading. However, a recently passed higher education reform calls for more learning-oriented assessment methods (such as portfolios, projects and modular examinations), allowing more feedback for students during the course of their studies. This requires a different use for external examiners, who are now also expected to contribute to improving assessment systems. However, in a study at the Department of Marine Technology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the external examiner did not have the adequate experience to evaluate assessment methods or contribute actively in discussions about the subject's assignments, teaching schedule and methods. Cooperation between the subject teacher and the examiner on criteria for and assessment of, specific papers was most useful.

Finally, linked to assessment was a concern expressed by Yeo and Chien (2007) about the growing problem of plagiarism. Procedures for responding consistently to plagiarism incidents are neither clear-cut nor easily implemented and yet inequitable treatment is intrinsically unfair. They offered a classification framework for determining the degree of seriousness of a plagiarism incident using four criteria each on a continuum from least to most serious. Trials with academics suggested the criteria were useful, useable and assisted in decision-making. However, professional development for staff will be required to further improve consistency. The trial also revealed the knowledge and thinking processes of academics that might lead to inconsistent decisions.

Transformative and Experiential Learning

A couple of papers expressly addressed the issue of pedagogic theory and argued for a transformative approach. Vieira (2002) noted that research into higher education is still scarce in Portugal. The implementation of external and internal evaluation systems in the last decade has motivated special attention to issues such as organisational models, academic achievement, adaptation processes and transition to the workplace, while neglecting matters directly related with pedagogical practices, an area still in need of development. A study at the University of Minho investigated teachers' and students' conceptions of quality in pedagogical practices. The study adopted a transformative and emancipatory conception of education and argued that pedagogical practices should aim at transforming and empowering the individual. However, the evidence was that students perceived a lack of reflectivity and self-direction and teachers focused on situational factors. More needs to be done to encourage critical, reflective transformative learning.

Bramming (2007) questioned whether the concept of satisfaction as a measurement of quality in higher education supports the goal of enhancing transformative learning. As higher education is about transforming people, not just their knowledge, it is argued that learning challenges the identities of students and even questions their personal integrity. Transformative learning is a painful process as well as a state of being that students have to accept and see as not only necessary but desired. Considerations of quality in higher education should therefore proceed from the goal of enhancing transformative learning based on the concept of 'strong learning'. A 'transformative learning identity' demands

philosophically grounded pedagogies, not only about learning as a process but about the forces that shape and make learning possible in the first place. Strong learning forces learning to be transformative through a continuous production of crisis.

Hamdheidari, Agahi and Papzan (2007) explored the challenges to the staff in the College of Agriculture at Razi University, Iran, in introducing an alternative educational programme. They argued that an experiential, dialogic and appreciative approach to teaching and learning will prepare competent, self-reliant and participative students ready to contribute to policy-making and working in the marginalised and impoverished areas of the country.

Student Engagement and Retention

Coates (2005) argued that quality assurance determinations need to take account of how and to what extent students engage with activities that are likely to lead to productive learning. A critical review of current possibilities for determining the quality of university education in Australia suggested that quality assurance systems fail to take account of student engagement. A sketch is provided of an approach for factoring student engagement data into quality assurance determinations. Meyer (1999) argued that any consideration of student learning 'quality' is incomplete without a multivariate knowledge of *how* and *why* students engage with the context and content of learning, with the emphasis on learning processes and the factors that directly affect them. He suggested that appropriate research and analysis could suggest discipline-specific learning quality indicators that would have a greater degree of sensitivity than more generalised indicators, such as those derived from the Australian course experience questionnaire, which are of limited applicability and use. Tam (2004), prompted by an increasing concern for quality in higher education in Hong Kong, reported a study conducted at Lingnan University, a small liberal arts institution, to measure the influence of university education on students' academic, social and personal growth. The purpose was to assess the added value to students of their university experience and the kind of education they received. The results suggested that university years are a time of student change on a broad front. Students did not just report gains in subject knowledge and in a range of cognitive and intellectual skills but also change or development on a broad array of value, attitudinal, psychosocial and moral dimensions.

A key feature of the student experience in a massified system is the retention of students, particularly in the initial year of study. There are other publications devoted extensively to this issue but *Quality in Higher Education* has published several papers relating to quality and retention.

Peterson, Kovel-Jarboe and Schwartz (1997) reported on the complementarity of the adoption of a quality-improvement philosophy and student retention and concluded that student retention is a relevant measure of academic quality improvement. However, Lee and Buckthorpe (2008) expressed concern about the use of entry cohort completion rates as a valid performance indicator and argued instead for exit cohort measures as a more robust indicator in an era of transfer and flexible engagement with programmes.

Richter (1997) noted that in Germany faculties have done little to give entrants and students full information about the structure, the goals and the impact of courses. With a more diverse student population, higher education institutions can do more to make the beginning of studies undemanding to help students to find their way into higher education. Rønning (1997) agreed and outlined how one Norwegian university introduced first-year students to their new learning environment. A trial quality programme of two semesters'

duration focused on learning techniques and study habits, with the aim of improving academic achievement, increasing the workload, counteracting drop-out and enhancing the students' wellbeing. The result was marked reduction in attrition, a small increase in achievement and a marked effect on student satisfaction with their learning environment. This reflects much of the general literature on the success of sustained induction and orientation programmes.

Yorke (2000) reported the outcome of surveys of a total of 2151 students who had prematurely left six institutions in the north-west of England in the mid-1990s. He argued that six main factors related to non-completion, of which dissatisfaction with the quality of the student experience was prominent. Further, retention varied considerably between academic subjects. Aldridge and Rowley (2001) suggested a model based on motivation and service quality rather than integration and adjustment (the perspective that dominates studies in the United States). They reported the outcome of a semi-structured telephone interview survey at Edge Hill College of Higher Education in the UK. Withdrawal factors reflect other studies and included: the course and institution not as expected; travelling; and domestic and financial difficulties.

Zepke and Leach (2007) argued that improving retention rates in post-school education has become a focus for policy-makers and researchers throughout the western world. However, they questioned prevailing assumptions that accountability and better learning and teaching would improve retention and that retaining students in tertiary education is a universally good thing. Using evidence from New Zealand and elsewhere they suggested: that accountability regimes may not markedly improve retention; institutions may have less influence over whether students leave or stay than assumed; and that staying with study may not be good for everyone. Hovdhaugen and Aamodt (2009) analysed reasons for withdrawal in Norway and also concluded that the most common reasons for students either transferring or dropping out are beyond the university's control. However, the learning environment seems to have been somewhat influential in the decision to leave. Therefore, improving the learning environment through closer contact between students and teachers will probably also enhance retention.

Although not directly about withdrawal, Grayson (2007) explored how 'sense of coherence' (SOC) mediated the effect of key stressors on students. Models of university outcomes have shown that the quality of the student experience has consequences for outcomes, such as academic achievement. However, such models have not included measures of students' SOC. He reported a study of Canadian first-year students at the University of British Columbia, York University, McGill University and Dalhousie University. He found that, independent of place of birth, the SOC of students of Chinese origin was lower than that of domestic students of European origin. High-SOC students were more able than others to deal with problems associated with university life and students who were able to deal with their problems successfully were more likely than others to have high levels of achievement.

Postgraduate Education

A couple of papers addressed the issue of postgraduate research supervision. Cryer (1998) examined the dilemmas in supervising postgraduate research students, which she attributed to subsets of perceived conflicting responsibilities to students, the discipline, the department and to the personal and professional needs of supervisors. She argued that codes of practice are of limited help in resolving the dilemmas and that there is no substitute for negotiation based on experience. Zhao (2003) argued that the emergence of the

knowledge management concept has profound implications for transforming the quality of postgraduate research supervision in universities. The primary goal of research supervision is the achievement of quality and completion. The research supervision process will more effectively achieve the goal if knowledge management is effectively integrated into the process. Based on the view that quality in higher education is about transforming students, he suggested a research supervision framework to help transform research students into knowledge workers and managers, which specifies milestones and a timeline against which to monitor progress. This provides a means of benchmarking for supervisors and academic managers to identify the best practices in research supervision.

Rodrigues, Lehmann and Fleith (2005) identified the factors that determine either a successful or unsuccessful outcome for the master's thesis project in a Brazilian study. A key aspect for success is the development of a partnership approach between advisor and student, with collegiality and mutual appreciation and a mutual development in relation to the project. Although not postgraduate, a related contribution (Holmberg, 2006) reported a Swedish study of what supervisors perceived as crucial aspects of quality in supervising students writing their bachelor theses. The conclusion was that the supervisors were unaware of the different ways their colleagues undertook the role, not least because there was no common theoretical frame of reference and a lack of communication. Thus, problems related to different perceptions of understanding the task may remain hidden or be neglected and underestimated.

Knight (1997) noted that international taught master's degrees are a growth area in the English-speaking world. However, there are uneven notions of the standards that define master's-level achievement, compounded by a huge diversity of offerings. He concluded that there is value in being clearer about what programmes offer and that disciplinary networks have some power to clarify standards and quality in coursework master's programmes. James and McInnis (1997) noted the rapid growth in student numbers on master's degrees in Australia, along with the gradual dominance of coursework delivery and diversity in course goals and structure. They reviewed 10 coursework master's programmes and identified a dividing line between explicit institutional quality assurance, as formulated in policy and the implicit perceptions and actions of staff. They argued that the design of effective quality assurance at programme level requires a better appreciation and accommodation of both.

Employability

Employability is another aspect of the concern with the quality of learning and teaching. *Quality in Higher Education* has provided a forum for discussions on employability as part of the debate on quality in higher education. Indeed, in their review of developments in the South African higher education system, Maharasoa and Hay (2001) argued that for students, employability, in the sense of post-graduation employment rates, is an important indicator of quality. In their study of university careers centres, Melrose and Reid (2001) argued that employability should be seen as a key element in developing the notion of quality as transformation. However, Gibbs (2009) provided a typically different perspective and argued that good quality is subsumed into the practices of skilful participants and that institutions should act upon their consciences. This is particularly important in the complex blending of the workplace and the academy, where codified quality may disrupt learning rather than support a flourishing environment for all stakeholders. Following Heidegger's notion of referential totalities, Gibbs argued that what should be sought is concealment of

quality and for its discovery only in times of genuine concern. Ultimately this means that quality should be part of everyday practice, which itself means trusting the expertise of those involved, not the precepts, to control activities.

Early discussions in the journal focused on the perceived need for teaching of generic skills. Tait and Godfrey (1999) argued that it is very difficult to establish the skills levels that students should reach by the various stages of their degree courses. For Tait and Godfrey, this is because of two issues: the different needs of various disciplines and courses on the one hand, and the differing needs and expectations of the UK's diverse student population on the other. De La Harpe, Radloff and Wyber (2000) suggested that, in order to better meet the requirements of employers for graduates who are more 'fit for purpose', universities may need to change the curriculum and how it is taught. With such a change, however, they argued that significant investment in staff development and monitoring of the change process is necessary. Measures of effectiveness of changes must be developed and used to improve graduate quality. Gibbs (1998), however, asked whether we can trust those who control higher education to deliver anything other than competencies aimed at securing employment, thus placing education in the hands of the industrialist, or whether there is a role for the professional educationalist. A competence model of education has benefits for those who feel attracted to an economic expediency model. However, he argued that the appropriateness of such business comparisons is debatable. He suggested that the notion of accountability in education through a cost-benefit analysis has taken the place of the trust that is at the core of liberal and anarchical notions of the educated person. Earlier, he had asked (Gibbs, 1996) 'whose life is it' and argued that higher education should not be sucked into focusing on employability. He maintained that there is a danger that the virtues of performativity skills, such as those advocated by the CBI, will be confused with the virtues of being a graduate. He argued that we ought to care that the higher educational system is under the driver of economic competitiveness, which *ipso facto* reduces the range of educational modes of revealing. When it becomes the meta-narrative for self, much of humanity can be lost. Individuals are more than the fragmented collections of qualifications; they are temporal beings in search of their authentic selves. A purpose of institutional education is to facilitate that process.

Much of the debate on employability in *QHE* was focused in a special issue in 2001, when it emerged that this issue was clearly a central one to the sector. In his analysis of the concept of employability, Harvey (2001) critiqued the prevailing tendency to create employability measures based on outcomes. The outcome approach results in employability being construed as an institutional achievement rather than the propensity of the individual student to get employment. The operationalisation of employability as a concept is examined and the implicit 'magic bullet' notion of employability-development opportunities is revealed. An alternative, more complex model is outlined but its applicability is subverted by the 'irrational' activities of graduate recruiters, which render useless any employability indicator based on the proportion of graduates obtaining work. An alternative approach, based on an audit of employability-development within institutions, is explored and some methodological pitfalls are outlined. Harvey suggested that any evaluation of employability needs to indicate areas for internal improvement rather than simply ranking institutions. As noted in the first part of the editorial, Little (2001) and Morley (2001) in this special issue also critiqued the idea of employability-based performance indicators.

Similarly, Holmes (2001) critiqued the skills agenda and suggested an alternative approach to graduate employability based first on a conceptual and theoretical analysis of the nature of human behaviour and second, on the claim that situated behaviour can only

be properly understood by interpreting activity as performance-of-a-kind. Such interpretation depends upon there being a set of social practices and a set of identities appropriate to the social situation. Holmes argued that curriculum enhancement is essential. In his description of the Canadian 'Dalhousie Career Portfolio' programme, Wright (2001) emphasised the need to prepare students for employment but, at the same time, enhance their learning experience. He argued that such programmes must integrate observations and lessons from the international arena, instil 'portfolio thinking' throughout the campus community and thoroughly monitor teaching, learning and employment outcomes. Washer (2007) proposed a practical framework for key skills that can be used or adapted for use in any discipline at university level. He argued that key skills need not threaten the notion of a liberal education but that revisiting the issue of key skills in university curricula can enhance content learning by promoting experiential and active learning innovations.

Aamodt and Havnes (2008) argued that for students and for society, a core aspect of higher education is to prepare for future employment. Employability, however, goes beyond getting a job and the authors focus on the quality of job performance, or job mastery. Employability is understood as a process and a product of learning both in higher education and in work life. The authors investigated job mastery as an indicator of employability and looked at different factors that may impact on the level of job mastery. Based on a survey among a cohort of students in professional education after three years in work, the authors analysed how job mastery was affected by learning outcomes during the study, further training and aspects of the workplace and the job.

Student feedback on their experience

The student experience of higher education has been a central focus of papers published in *Quality in Higher Education* since its inception. In the first issue of the journal, Hill (1995) proposed that students should be involved as equal partners in the definition and assessment of quality and Ratcliff (1996) went further and proposed a more proactive role for student-centred evaluations in state and national quality assurance processes. Increasingly, he claimed, student feedback on their experiences has become an important internal quality assurance mechanism and is growing in prominence in external evaluations.

In an exploration of 'customer delight', Popli (2005) argued that customers are best placed to recognise high quality. Using student feedback surveys as a quality tool has been an important part of the quality-improvement processes at many institutions for over 20 years (Harvey, 2003; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005).

Several authors have given qualified support to student feedback as a quality-improvement tool, primarily because of their limitations. Brown (1998) discussed the problems that arise in using questionnaires to explore student expectations. Narasimhan (2001) noted that student evaluations of teaching are problematic in that they are usually carried out at the end of courses, so the information cannot be used to improve the course for that particular cohort of students.

Several articles express a view that student feedback is valuable as one source of information that, as Bean (2005) argued, needs to be triangulated in order to inform management for improvement. In her study of student feedback surveys in Hong Kong, Geall (2000) argued that such surveys provide information from the student perspective to help management plan improvements. Stensaker (1999) explored the use of student surveys as a means of gathering information from key stakeholders but argued that only limited use is made of the information compared with data from other sources. Leckey and Neill (2001) continued

in this vein, arguing in the case of Ulster that student feedback was a vital source of information for the quality assurance process. Arguably, this article, along with Harvey's (2003) contribution that was based on a commissioned submission, had some influence on the 2001 Cooke Committee, which identified the collection and use of student feedback as a key pillar of quality assurance in the UK.

One of the major problems affecting student feedback processes is that of low response rates. The issue of engaging students in quality processes has long exercised scholars. The experience of many institutions running student feedback surveys is that of small response rates. Sid Nair, Adams and Mertova (2008) explored ways of enhancing student engagement as one of the more effective and efficient ways of addressing declining student survey response rates. In a forum paper, Sid Nair and Adams (2009) discussed another aspect of the problem of response rates—the use of electronic surveys—and observed from their experience that web-based electronic delivery of surveys boosted response rates.

In their influential paper on student satisfaction surveys, Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grøgaard (2002) found that the academic and pedagogic quality of teaching are crucial determinants of student satisfaction, pointing to a potential overlap between student satisfaction surveys and surveys on student assessment of teaching. However, the analysis also demonstrates that social climate, aesthetic aspects of the physical infrastructure and the quality of services from the administrative staff should not be underestimated when trying to improve student satisfaction and opportunity for learning. Griffin, Coates, McInnis and James (2003) also found that student feedback surveys that focus on teaching and learning miss a wide range of other aspects of the student experience that have an impact on students' satisfaction. As a result, they have explored ways of giving Australia's course experience questionnaire a broader perspective that takes into account the potential of non-classroom context influences on the student learning experience. Indeed, cultural barriers also need to be considered when transporting student surveys from country to country. In their exploration of the potential for using student evaluations in Vietnamese higher education, Nguyen and McInnis (2002) argued that there are major cultural obstacles to be overcome before such schemes could be successfully implemented.

Student feedback surveys in themselves are of several kinds and distinctions need to be drawn between those that are primarily used as a way of league-tabling institutions and those that have a genuine quality-enhancement purpose. Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield (2007) observed that many surveys are carried out but with little clear purpose. The authors compared national surveys of the UK's National Student Survey type with institutional surveys and found that institutional surveys are much better suited to inform genuine institutional improvement than broader, blunter, national surveys. Kane, Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield (2008) also argued that benchmarking satisfaction over time can be extremely valuable where a consistent feedback cycle is employed. The authors explored a unique collection of student feedback data from a period of over 18 years and not only identified significant changes that have occurred reflected in the data but also argued that the questionnaire itself is a dynamic tool and the ways in which its structure develops reflects historical change.

Brown, Carpenter, Collins and Winkvist-Noble (2007) critiqued the UK government official website that contains the results of an annual survey of student views. They found the site promulgated generic problems with information about programme quality, including the lack of agreement as to what is meant by quality and how it is to be measured or assessed; the level of detail; and accessibility to non-experts.

Student Charters

Student charters were *de rigueur* at the end of the 1990s and a couple of articles addressed this issue as part of the mutual contract between institutions and students.

Beeson (1998) reported how a charter of student rights and responsibilities was developed as a component of quality improvement in an Australian university. The collaborative nature of the development, and consequent joint ownership by the university and the students, meant that students strongly approved of the adoption of the charter. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the development, adoption and existence of the charter all contributed towards an increase in the quality of the relationship between the prime student body and the university. This was evident in an increased level of trust, a heightened spirit of cooperation and a willingness to negotiate constructively. Harvey and Green's (1993) definition of quality as transformation was considered more appropriate and more constructive for the purpose than the earlier definition, fitness for purpose, on which thinking about the student charter was initially based. He concluded that it became clear that, while the charter proved to be a device through which quality improvement could be pursued in a focused way in all areas covered by the charter, a much more systematic follow-up was needed in order to achieve this.

Aldridge and Rowley (1998) noted that charters are, essentially, a formal contract between the public service provider and their customers and, thus, student charters serve as a contract between the educational institution and its students. As such, the charter outlines the experience that the students can expect. They described their analysis of various charters found in different UK institutions of higher education, with a view to both exploring how charters manage student expectations and to identifying some aspects of good practice in the formulation and presentation of charters.

Service Quality

As higher educational institutions struggle for competitive advantage and high service quality, the evaluation of educational service quality is essential to provide motivation for, and to give feedback on, the effectiveness of educational plans and implementation.

Rowley (1996) argued that the service quality literature demonstrates that, when seeking to design tools that measure quality, it is important not to overlook fundamental questions such as: 'What is service quality?' 'What do the various instruments designed to measure service quality actually measure?' and 'What is the relationship between quality measurement and continuous quality improvement?' She introduced SERVQUAL as a focus for the debate surrounding the instruments for measuring quality that have been reported in the service-quality literature. The two distinct literatures, those of educational quality and those of service quality, each have some insights to contribute but each has its own inherent debates. Exploring and integrating these issues for application in the measurement of educational quality is a considerable challenge.

Li and Kaye (1998) examined two alternative methods of measuring service quality (SERVQUAL and SERVPREF). They argued that SERVPREF is a better approach than SERVQUAL in explaining the variation of students' satisfaction with overall quality of course delivery. Tan and Kek (2004) used an enhanced version of SERVQUAL in order to better understand and evaluate the student experience and provide a process that is transportable.

The use of student evaluations of service quality has shown different levels of complexity and can reflect students' development over time. In her study of postgraduate students over a three-year period, Clewes (2003) highlighted three distinct stages in the educational

service experience: first, the pre-course position, which is centred on service expectations; second, the in-course experience; and third, post-course service value assessment.

More fundamentally, Lomas (2007) examined the notion of the student as a customer in a university, focusing on the perceptions of academic staff. He suggested that academics do not believe that higher education is just another service industry. His in-depth interviews amongst staff in six UK universities showed that, whereas the government and its agencies stress the need to consider students as customers, there is very limited support for this notion amongst academic staff. Academic discipline, rather than the type of university, appears to be influential in determining attitudes towards the notion of the student as a customer.

Banta, Black and Lambert (1996) explored the assessment of out-of-class activities. In the US, 85% of the time college students spend outside formal classes is at least as influential in their learning and development as the time spent in the classroom. Thus colleges and universities design support systems such as advising, recreational activities, art and music series and job placement services to promote comprehensive student development. Assessment of the effectiveness of these services and their impact on students is an important component of evaluating institutional quality. This paper provides examples of student development assessment activities and of the uses made of assessment findings at representative two- and four-year colleges and universities across the US. Arnold, Fisher and Glover (1998) argued that the academic community in the US tended to accept that student satisfaction is linked to the quality of academic advising. However, given that there is no standard questionnaire measuring student satisfaction with advising they reported their work on the development of such a measurement device and its implementation. No significant differences in level of satisfaction, number of visits or time spent with advisors were found by grade-point average, student classification or gender of advisor.

Welle-Strand (2000) observed that recent studies of Norwegian public higher education indicated that academic staff were ambivalent towards public expectations of service orientation and applied research. Welle-Strand argued that the future 'winner institutions' will be those able to produce and transmit innovative and relevant knowledge that can be competitive in the market. Such institutions are likely to have the best chances of finding a pragmatic balance between knowledge-based services relevant for the market and independent, innovative and critical research. Lander (2000) proposed that quality across the span of teaching, research and service work resembles service constituted as a morally 'response-able' relationship.

While student feedback has become widespread, there remain doubts about its efficacy as there appears to be resistance to making use of the data it generates. There are also concerns about the way the data are collected but fundamentally the problem is that most student feedback is predicated on a consumer model and this review has suggested that the student as consumer is an uncomfortable metaphor for most academics. Further, as Bramming (2007) noted, satisfaction surveys may be an inappropriate way of assessing transformative learning. There are thus continued doubts about the service function of higher education institutions and the concept of service quality, imported from industry, has found it difficult to make headway in the higher education context in the same way that industrial models of quality management were passing fads on the fringes of higher education quality assurance.

Research

Surprisingly little quality assurance has been directed at research in higher education and this is reflected in a paucity of articles directly addressing research quality. Gibbs (1995)

argued that quality in research does not automatically produce quality in teaching. Further, that industrial models of quality assurance involving strong central management control are inappropriate for universities. The link between research and teaching is in the kinds of mechanisms that support quality. Academics already know how to support quality in their research, where standards are already high. For every process that supports quality in research there is a parallel process that can be used to support quality in teaching. Universities should adopt all of these processes, the most important of which involves reward for excellence in teaching for both individuals and departments. Johnston (1996) critiqued the Gibbs article claiming that his polarisation of teaching and research as conflicting rather than complementary activities, his unsubstantiated empirical generalisations and his intemperate descriptions of academic colleagues was unfortunate and would serve only to harden divisions rather than promote reasoned debate.

Johnston, Jones and Gould (1995) explored whether the larger departments in British universities in general produce the highest quality research. The national data seemed to support this but the returns from the economies of scale and scope that are generated by larger departments are far from linear. There is a rapid gain from an increase in department size up to about 40 research-active academic staff members but only a very slight gain thereafter. They concluded that the economics of departmental scale and the economics of institutional scope should not be confused, therefore in general, international class research is concentrated in larger departments but these may be in relatively small institutions that have small numbers of such units. Furthermore, there is no direct causal link between size of department and quality of research output: it is mediated by institutional ethos. Size alone need not guarantee excellence since much depends on the staff appointed, the milieux within which they work and the institution's mission.

Tight (2003) argued that the peer-review process for research publication is central to academic work, yet remains an unexplored, largely secret, activity. Tight examined the reviews he had received for his submitted articles and book proposals to show the differences in the quantity and quality of the advice given, the differences between the reviews of the same paper produced by different reviewers and the relationship between reviews and editorial decisions. Suggestions were offered as to how the reviewing process might be improved.

Impact of quality assurance

There have been relatively few studies of the impact of quality assurance in the 15 years of *Quality in Higher Education*. Given the specialist nature of the journal, this may seem surprising but reflects the general paucity of significant research into the impact of quality assurance processes. There are about 25 items that focused mainly on impact; of these, nine were published in a special issue in 1997.

The earliest assessment of impact was published in the first year of the journal. Saarinen (1995) explored the Finnish situation and concluded that irrespective of the purpose of quality assessments, the overriding concern with teaching and research mean that departments 'translate' the assessments to suit their own needs.

In the special issue, Volume 3, Number 1 of 1997, contributors from nine institutions outlined their experiences of the impact and effectiveness of quality assurance processes.

Baldwin (1997) looked at how the short-lived national quality assurance system of the early 1990s in Australia impacted on Monash University. She noted that the resentment of the resultant ranking system was due to a fundamental uncertainty about the basis for

ranking and the lack of transparency in the judging processes. The system imposed by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) was matched by an internal process at Monash in which student feedback on teaching was a key element. Baldwin argued that a combination of external and internal processes had resulted in three main areas of gain: more rigorous course approval procedures; increased awareness of students' perspectives on teaching and learning; and a perceptible shift in the climate, with a new attention to teaching issues and an intensification of debate about effective learning. On the deficit side were four key issues: an excessive bureaucratisation of procedures, with associated pedantry and legalism; a greatly increased administrative workload for academic staff, taking them away from their 'core business'; a formalism that can stifle creativity and individuality, the very qualities that universities should foster; and a de-professionalisation of academic staff, associated with a policing mentality and a lack of trust.

These themes of bureaucratisation, administrative burden, stifling of creativity and lack of trust have been recurring concerns ever since.

However, the other papers in the special issue were, in the main, cautiously optimistic about the potential for improvement. Askling (1997) reflected on her experiences at Linköping University and argued that external quality monitoring in Sweden had an indirect impact and must be seen in relation to other substantial changes. The improvement-oriented approach to external monitoring being pioneered in Sweden at the time by the National Agency provided an important means to encourage quality enhancement and strategic management within the changed Swedish system. Sweden subsequently developed an accountability-oriented approach and the potential of the improvement process was lost. Indeed, Wahlén (2004) subsequently assessed the impact of national quality audit of Swedish higher education institutions between 1995 and 2002. He found that the audits have resulted in the development of policy and structure of institutional quality work but that cultural change at the departmental level is modest. The subsequently introduced programme and subject assessments impacted at departmental level. Examples of changes include the monitoring of student experience and efforts to raise the number of degrees awarded, while still maintaining quality. The national programme reviews, though, he noted, were sometimes used to the exclusion of reviews carried out as a process of internal quality assurance and other measures, which may counteract the further development of quality work in universities and colleges.

Similarly, Newton (1997) reflected, in the special issue, on the Welsh system and its impact on the North East Wales Institute. He suggested that the methodology encouraged team-based action planning and increased dissemination of good practice resulting in improvement of the student experience and positive outcomes for staff. Smith (1997) in reviewing the situation in the United States, focused on Virginia and argued that effectiveness of quality assurance processes ('assessment programs' as they were known in the US) was correlated with the involvement of the most senior academic managers. He argued that although there had been many positive results in Virginia, there was still little link between assessment and strategic planning and restructuring.

Silva, Reich and Gallegos (1997) noted that Latin America did not have a tradition of higher education evaluation and in their review of the procedures developing in Chile they argued that the processes in both the private and public sectors showed positive effects leading to indications of change in institutional culture. Lemaitre (2004) subsequently traced the development of quality assurance mechanisms in Chile, analysing changes in the higher education system and the challenges to the quality of educational offerings. A compulsory licensing process for new higher education institutions was established, along

with a voluntary process of institutional accreditation. Analysis of the impact of these different mechanisms, even though some were recent, showed evidence of a cultural change. She claimed that a system, without any formal quality assurance scheme as late as 1989, now has structured mechanisms accepted by the majority of higher education institutions and endorsed by most stakeholders in Chile.

Gift and Bell Hutchinson (2007) critically examined the outcomes of quality assurance programme reviews on the three campuses of the University of the West Indies. They found that the academic staff of the university increasingly implemented the recommendations of review teams and that this was, in part, facilitated by the university's monitoring mechanism. Actions taken to respond to these recommendations contributed to the enhancement of teaching and learning but sustainability of this, they argued, would be dependent upon the success of the measures to address the critical issue of resources.

A focus on internal processes was evident in some contributions to the special issue. Alean-Kirkpatrick, Hänni and Lutz (1997) explored the impact of internal quality assessment of teaching that has been undertaken at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich following a change in the law governing institutes of technology. They concluded that the internal assessment of teaching has had considerable impact on the didactic quality at the institute. In similar vein, Kristensen (1997) accentuated the impact of internal processes. She was encouraged by the shift in external quality monitoring in many countries away from accountability towards improvement. She explored the impact of national activities on quality improvement at Copenhagen Business School and concluded that external quality monitoring is not as effective as internal quality monitoring in producing continuous improvement.

Stensaker (2003) examined the impact of external quality monitoring (EQM) and identified areas in higher education where changes have taken place. He asked whether quality improvement is actually the result of EQM. He suggested that the data are ambiguous and highlighted typical side effects of current EQM systems. He argued that lack of effects directly attributable to EQM should not be seen as a design error alone but as a misconception of how organisational change actually takes place. He concluded that a more dynamic view on organisational change, highlighting the responsibility of the institutional leadership as 'translators of meaning', would contribute to a more useful process. Harvey and Newton (2004) showed that accountability, compliance and, in some countries, control, are much more frequent rationales for external monitoring than improvement. Impact research, they argued, is difficult because it is impossible to control all relevant factors to be able to map causal relationships. However, impact studies reinforce the view that quality assurance is about compliance and accountability and has 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 external quality monitoring: at best the existence of the latter provides a legitimation for internally driven innovation. They concluded that instead of politically acceptable methods, quality evaluation needs to adopt appropriate research methodologies rather than taken-for-granted assurance approaches.

The greater effectiveness of internal over external processes is another perspective that has endured for more than a decade. It is enshrined, in effect, in the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ENQA, 2005), which emphasised the responsibility of institutions for ensuring their own quality. This raises the question of the need for external process and has led to the perpetual claim by external agencies and governments that without the external process there would be no incentive for developing internal processes. This reflects the growing

distrust mentioned by Baldwin (1997) and raises the question of how universities maintained such high standards for 800 years!

Horsburgh (1997) noted that quality-monitoring requirements in New Zealand in the 1990s expanded significantly. The requirements for external quality monitoring can be directly linked to the devolution of 'control' from a centralised to a devolved model of educational funding and management, with criteria for demonstrating accountability now the key factor in determining external quality-monitoring policy. She illustrated the impact of external processes on internal quality monitoring and the enhancement of teaching and learning at Auckland Institute of Technology. She argued that, despite tensions between the accountability-led requirements and teaching and learning enhancement, some positive impact of external quality monitoring on teaching programmes is evident. However, two years later, Horsburgh (1999), having undertaken a detailed analysis of the determinants of improvement in learning and teaching, produced a seminal paper that showed the tenuous link between external quality processes and student learning. There are many other more significant factors impacting on student learning than external quality monitoring, which she argued was not concerned with the complexity of a whole teaching programme or issues such as leadership or the culture in which students learn. Social, economic, political and personal contexts are powerful influencers and for quality monitoring to have an impact on student learning, the emphasis must be on curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment.

Gerbic and Kranenburg (2003), though, argued that the New Zealand external process impacted positively on new programme development. Clear documentation that requires significant detail of philosophy, structure, sequence of learning, details of the individual courses, teaching and learning approaches, assessment approach as well as details of the assessment activities planned as well as student support services results in a more cohesive, student-centred and implementation-ready programme. A panel process that includes industry as well as academic stakeholders increases the responsiveness of a programme to both academic and professional interests. However, peer-review panels are far from consistent in approach and judgement; another enduring concern expressed about visiting teams.

A later paper from New Zealand questioned whether it is possible to identify the impact of external quality assurance processes. Carr, Hamilton and Meade (2005) were sceptical of whether independent effects could be isolated and concluded that there is an array of influences for change within higher education in addition to those generated by external quality assurance. The influences promoting change in universities interact and overlap, and even work against each other, to such an extent that it is impossible to isolate independent effects. Nonetheless, they argued that, in the wake of the introduction of external quality processes, the University of Otago witnessed improved teaching and research and the authors were thus persuaded that external quality assurance had a powerful initial role as a catalyst, as well as a validation role for university-led reform; continuing the view that external processes are a necessary prerequisite of internal improvement.

A similar view resulted from a comparative study of Dutch and Italian institutional responses to external processes (Minelli *et al.*, 2006). The two very different national and organisational backgrounds nonetheless resulted in a positive vision of how evaluation can contribute to the change process in universities. External legal rules and procedures formulated by national boards or agencies become a relevant resource that academic management can use to legitimise cultural and organisational change.

De Miguel, Escudero and Rodriguez (1998) reported that the fundamental legal and organisational transformation of the Spanish university system during the 1980s had an

impact on autonomy, management, academic programmes and funding. The National Plan of Evaluation of the Universities' Quality, which used self-study and external evaluation, focused particularly on teaching, research and management, and has led to some encouraging effects. More recently, Rosa, Tavares and Amaral (2006) explored the Portuguese situation and also reported a degree of optimism amongst rectors and to a lesser degree academic staff about the external quality processes. They noted that while rectors paid more attention to the results, coordinators were more centred on processes. Moreover, the institutional leadership paid more attention to internal procedures and services, strategic management and institutional management structures than to actual improvements in the student learning experience.

South Africa was another jurisdiction subject to evaluations of impact. Wilkinson (2003) reported on the impact of national transformation imperatives embedded in the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995. The outcomes-based approach implemented as a result has impacted on quality assurance at the programme level. Since 1996, all higher education programmes had to be adapted or redesigned according to the new guidelines for registration on the national qualification framework (NQF). Wilkinson then reported lessons learned as a result of developing an internal quality assurance instrument designed to enable staff to respond to these external imperatives.

An aspect of impact that is usually ignored is the impact of evaluations of agencies themselves on the practices of the agencies. Szanto (2005) reviewed six cases of external evaluations of external quality assurance agencies from three continents. The lessons drawn from these cases showed that external evaluation of agencies is a powerful means of assuring and enhancing the quality of operation of agencies serving both their improvement and accountability. Moreover, external evaluations can facilitate the process of mutual recognition of agencies, evaluation results and national quality assurance systems. Blackmur (2008) critiqued reviews of agencies, arguing that they are essentially ineffective. He used the example of the review of the performance of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), undertaken in 2005–2006. It was commissioned by AUQA and the review report was published in May 2006. He argued that the AUQA review was flawed to a degree that renders it inadequate as a global exemplar. Its conclusions must be treated with caution by higher education policy-makers, departments of state, universities, business, students and other institutions in Australia and internationally.

An overview of the discussion on impact at the INQAAHE members' meeting in The Hague in 2006 revealed the agency perspective (Harvey, 2006). Although agreeing that impact is difficult to measure, the meeting of quality assurance agency delegates, drawn from a wide array of countries, agreed that external quality monitoring had an impact on higher education provision. Periodic reviews and follow-ups demonstrate changes over time, with a high degree of compliance with the recommended changes. Performance indicators, such as retention rates, graduation rates, the level of final award, graduate employment and course entry requirements, all suggest improvements followed external quality assurance processes. Further, the agencies also referred to widespread developments evident within institutions, including the setting up of internal quality processes and specialist quality units. Anecdotal evidence also suggested positive benefits of external quality assurance. The self-evaluation report required by nearly all agencies was seen by many as the main benefit of the external quality procedures, which also reflects anecdotal evidence from institutions themselves. Again, the agencies insisted that internal review would not be undertaken adequately, if at all, outside the context of the whole external monitoring process, including the site visit. There was also a view, although little evidence,

that graduates were more reflective, more attuned to the labour market and better prepared for professional practice than ever before. The agencies did acknowledge, though, that external quality assurance places insufficient focus on research.

Finally, Ratcliff (2003) pointed out that over the last two decades and across the globe, quality assurance processes have been implemented, then modified, replaced or augmented with more stringent policies and procedures. While the pace and intensity of quality assurance and enhancement activities has accelerated greatly, its impact on the improvement of programmes and students remains less clear. Equally unclear is whether the current investments in quality reviews have delivered the political and social assurances that reputedly promulgated them, or whether the time and resources devoted to them are warranted given their uncertain benefits. He raised the issue of the transformation of external quality monitoring so that it might contribute to improving the learning of students.

Conclusion

So what has quality assurance done for us? The review suggests that it has resulted in clear documentation and transparency, although external processes could be better aligned to everyday academic activity. Internal processes are still developing and the link between external processes, internal processes and improvements in teaching and learning seem to be tenuous and patchy. What is remarkable is the internationalisation of quality assurance and the standardisation of procedures, even though they leave a lot to be desired. Attempts to push a consumerist approach to higher education have met with indifference and while there are increasing social demands being placed on higher education there remains a strong commitment to autonomy, independence and academic freedom, which quality assurance procedures sometimes rub up against. It has been 15 years with lots of enthusiasm and ideas, as exemplified in the articles in *Quality in Higher Education*, but also 15 years of inertia and compliant indifference among a substantial section of the academic and administrative community. It begs the question: could the quality of higher education have been enhanced more efficiently and effectively without elaborate quality assurance systems?

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