

## **The Sixth *QHE* Seminar**

### **The End of Quality?**

**Birmingham, 25–26 May, 2001**

## **Lessons to be learned? – An Irish perspective**

**Stuart Garvie**

**Dublin Institute of Technology**

### **Abstract**

Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland has experienced unprecedented growth and change over the past thirty years. In Britain, a similar process was experienced soon after World War II and accelerated in the 1960s. The expansion and diversification in Ireland has been particularly complex in that, over the same period, there have been rapid and significant developments in technology and communications, as well as in Irish society itself. Within this context of expansion and change, issues of academic quality have come to the fore. In the event, many of the problems of comparability of standards and strategic planning in higher education have been revealed and are being investigated under the general banner of quality assurance and improvement. This paper seeks to describe the emergence of quality assurance in education in Ireland and considers the issues that have arisen in that process. In particular, and in the light of the Bologna Declaration, it questions whether experiences in other countries have influenced the policies and strategies adopted in Ireland.

### **Background**

Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland has experienced unprecedented growth and change over the past thirty years. In Britain, a similar process was experienced soon after World War II and accelerated in the 1960s. The expansion and diversification in Ireland has been particularly complex in that, over the same period, there have been rapid and significant developments in technology and communications, as well as in Irish society itself. Within this context of expansion and change, issues of academic quality have come to the fore. In the event, many of the problems of comparability of standards and strategic planning in higher education have been revealed and are being investigated under the general banner of quality assurance and improvement. This paper seeks to describe the emergence of quality assurance in education in Ireland and considers the issues that have arisen in that

process. In particular, and in the light of the Bologna Declaration, it questions whether experiences in other countries have influenced the policies and strategies adopted in Ireland.

## **Changing nature of third-level education**

Recently we have seen major changes in the role of higher education in society throughout the world. Once the domain of the intellectual elite, the modern university now seems to be abandoning its traditional role of education in favour of providing the industrial skills necessary for the development of national economies. The market, to a greater or lesser extent, is dictating the curriculum and its development; students more and more are choosing skills-orientated courses rather than the traditional disciplines. The role of the university has changed absolutely from its origins, and the vital role the university had in the formation of the cultural and spiritual values of our world has been diminished or lost in a furious charge towards vocationalism in the new higher education philosophy. It is a rapidly changing scene whereby the more traditional universities, however reluctantly, are gradually dismantling their ivory towers, while the newer, more vocational, institutions seek academic recognition and acceptance in the established university world. The scene is also turbulent, as the changes are driven by large increases in student numbers in most countries since the middle of the last century. The universities, with their crucial output of graduates, have become the powerhouses of industrial development. In Ireland, as elsewhere, they appear to be doing this successfully.

The participation rate in higher education in terms of the percentage of the 18-year-old cohort has moved from the advantaged phase of less than 5 per cent in the 1950s to the mass phase of 30 to 50 per cent of recent times. It appears that it will continue upwards to the universal phase of more than 50 percent. (A point to note is that the mature student participation in Ireland is low by comparative standards, with 4 to 6 percent the norm in most third level institutions). Thus third-level education, with its emphasis now unashamedly on vocationalism, is lining up in direct succession to primary and secondary level education as the normal and expected route for young people today. A particular aspect of this is the effect that it is having on the range of courses offered. Academic genetics are such that university disciplines keep subdividing into smaller units, and some of these units develop further to become fully-fledged disciplines with courses offered as part of the regular university calendar. For instance, there are now over 40 types of engineering degrees, where 100 years ago there were only two, civil and military. In general, with some notable exceptions, the university world has been quite liberal in accepting academic innovations. With the extraordinary growth in research, it is not surprising that ambitious and successful academics will, together with their many international collaborators, stake out their own domain, asserting its vital importance.

In particular, the important commercial successes of interdisciplinary research in science, engineering and medicine have been a vital part of the growth pattern, where their contribution to our living standards and comforts have been enormous.

The situation is changing, mainly by students voting with their feet as well as their brains, so that many in the university world now view the proliferation of new degrees

as being out of control. In my own institution, there is constant, and growing, criticism of 'academic drift'. This drift is upwards, in that previous certificate and diploma programmes are being converted to degrees, and there are many and varied new postgraduate degrees. Whereas in earlier times US universities were derided in Europe for accrediting such 'funny' topics as dance, mortuary sciences or even nursing studies, now universally accepted, the European universities were staid and staunchly conservative in their attitude to curricula development.

Oddly, it is the UK, once the most conservative of all higher education sectors, which is leading the charge in innovative curricula changes. There are more than 40,000 third-level courses on offer in the UK. Degrees in surfing, knitting and golf course management are on offer alongside the traditional options such as law, medicine and english literature.

Critics of the developments are appalled at the new courses, describing them as quasi-academic and vacuous, claiming that they are bolstered in absurd ways with academic padding so as to stretch them artificially over three or four-year degree programmes. Conversely, critics of these critics call them academic snobs, intellectual dinosaurs out of tune with the demands of students and the industrial marketplace. Indeed there is some evidence to support the view that the marketplace has taken over the curriculum development strategy and that the traditional academics have been consigned to the archives of academic history.

### **Regulatory and policy background**

In the Republic of Ireland, despite the many aforementioned changes and developments, academic quality assurance and quality audit procedures have not yet been applied systematically to higher education. However, the emphasis placed on quality assurance in the Universities Act 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 with its plan for a new national qualifications authority, (now in place – National Qualifications Authority (NQA)) indicates that these procedures, and the consequent fundamental rethinking of higher education activities will, in the future, be a significant aspect of the work of the higher education institutions in Ireland. I believe that the Bologna Declaration could not come at a better time for Irish Education; although late to the starting gate of regulated quality assurance, the opportunities that can be availed of under Bologna will allow Ireland to embrace quality assurance but miss the bureaucratic and prescriptive methods of the UK system and go direct to the more realistic and workable methods that will emerge. A word of caution here: the European agencies have to get it right from the outset, as a drift to overarching and invasive bureaucracy will diminish the whole process at time when globalisation will put European higher education under intense competition and scrutiny.

Prior to the 1960s the Irish government did not interfere to any significant extent in the internal affairs of the universities and did not openly raise questions about academic decisions and standards.

The expansion of the higher education system and the increased government expenditure on the system over the past thirty years have led to a sea change in the

relationship between the government and the higher education institutions (Clancy, , 1989). The changes included a particular focus on the emergence of quality assurance as a significant factor in the changing relationship.

However, the emergence of academic quality assurance as a distinct concern in higher education in the Republic of Ireland had not occurred by the end of the 1980s, in spite of the fact that, by then, quality assurance had been a major theme in British and mainland European higher education for more than a decade. For instance, in a comprehensive review of educational policy issues in Ireland, published in 1989, there was no reference to quality assurance or to matters of academic standards that are now accepted as pertinent to academic quality assurance (Mulcahy and O'Sullivan, 1989).

The terminology of quality assurance first entered the public debate in Ireland with the publication by the minister for Education of the Green Paper on education in 1992 (An Roinn Oideachais. 1992). Many areas for rightful questioning in relation to quality in higher education are included in this Green Paper: in particular it envisaged quality assurance in higher education to be founded on twin pillars, one internal, and one external. The internal foundation would be the development of performance indicators and quality review procedures within the institutions. The external foundation would be the appropriate monitoring and assistance to the institutions through an audit unit within the Higher Education Authority (HEA). It saw as a key measure the improvement of the quality of teaching, guidance and assistance available to students through appropriate staff development. It suggested that the institutions, and in particular the universities, should have maximum flexibility in developing courses, but that within the constraints of policy, budget and physical resources, courses should be run cost-efficiently and should not adversely affect other courses.

While many of the recommendations have not yet been implemented, it is of some significance that a quality assurance role was, at that stage, proposed for the HEA in respect of the universities. The government's comprehensive White Paper on education, published in 1995, set out the background and policy framework against which future developments in Irish education, including higher education, would be progressed (An Roinn Oideachais, 1995). Interestingly the White Paper discussed quality assurance in higher education under the general heading of accountability, indicating the main origin of government concern in the matter. The White Paper noted how the Report on the National education Convention in 1994 had stated that the development of good quality assurance procedures was a 'central task of management in higher education institutions', to achieve the highest standards of quality for the 'benefit of students, society and the economy' (NECS, 1994). It emphasised that quality is the 'hallmark that underpins the status and mobility of graduates both nationally and internationally'.

While it acknowledged that quality assurance was a complex issue, it highlighted the contradiction between autonomy and accountability, the widespread acceptance in higher education of the need for accountability relation to public funds and the worry that such accountability and efficiency should not diminish academic control of key academic matters. The checks and balances needed to resolve this contradiction would consist of appropriate and rigorous peer review of individuals and departments in the higher educational institutions. These institutions would be responsible for putting

quality assurance procedures in place. In order to help weak departments, faculties and institutions, the White Paper proposed that a comprehensive national programme of staff development for higher education teachers be established. This debate was in 1994. Compare the position of the already well-established Quality Assurance Agency in the UK at that stage. The Universities Act 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, which came into force in February 2001, bring much of the proposals of the White Paper into legislation. After almost a decade of study, discussion and government policy statements, there is now in place a legislative framework for quality assurance in higher education. The very fact that this framework is sketchy and not strongly prescriptive allows the institutions to develop their procedures from their own histories and to organically implant them as routine elements of their day-to-day work.

## **Future Developments**

Higher education institutions in Ireland would claim that they have always striven for quality and excellence in their activities and always fostered an ethos of improvement as part of their mission. However, they have not been able to offer, and do not yet offer, objective assurance in relation to quality in any appreciable degree. In the past, the institutions did not feel the need to declare explicitly their missions. Until recently they would have felt no need for a statement of their mission or for a strategic plan of action for a period into the future. Serious comparisons with leading 'benchmark' – and I use that word other than the QAA definition – institutions elsewhere in the world would not have been made. But the revolutionary change, from elite institutions with small classes and more or less socially coherent student groups with relatively narrow ranges of ability to mass education institutions with large classes and wide social diversity and wide range of ability is now well underway in Ireland. The need to manage this change is pressing. Moreover the notion of service to students and society is becoming more demanding than ever before. The concept of a multi-faceted, holistic and caring learning institution is gaining ground as the organisational paradigm of the higher education institution in this new age. In Ireland the allegation has been made that the imposition of quality assurance systems by institutions of government represents a serious government mistrust of the professionalism and integrity of academic staff. It is argued that mistrust poses a threat to staff morale, which in turn could cause a degradation of the quality of academic activities and results. It is certainly essential that any quality assurance mechanisms must support and encourage the motivation and integrity of teachers and researchers. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is still resistance to academic quality assurance from many of the academic staff of Irish third-level institutions; in many cases the negative publicity surrounding some aspects of the work of the QAA is cited as reason enough not to go down the road of an overarching agency with compliance powers. However, it is difficult to cogently argue for the current situation to continue in a democratic society; what other profession would hold the situation in which the individual teacher is the principal assessor of the efficacy of their personal work?

In this age of accountability, higher education in Ireland is now embarking on quality assurance and quality improvement a primary mechanisms and measures of this accountability. The government, and the society it represents, is demanding the achievement of excellence from higher education institutions, educators, students and

graduates. Quality assurance is to be a key tool in the educational processes of these institutions, ensuring that they adequately fulfil these demands and needs of society and continue to justify the eminent role they play in Irish society. This seminar is entitled *The End of Quality*. I am not sure if that means the Aristotelian end, in that it has been reached. I cannot see the QAA agreeing! Ireland has come late to a formal system of quality assurance in education. In fact, it is only starting out. However, the Bologna Declaration may well change matters.

## **Bologna Declaration**

IN the European context it is hard to disagree with the view expressed by the Salamanca Convention:<sup>1</sup> ‘Quality is the basic underlying condition for trust, employability, mobility, compatibility and competitiveness in the European Higher Education Area’.

The fundamental and difficult question is how to devise a system of quality assurance which is acceptable to the universities, respects national linguistic and discipline differences and yet produces for both employers and other universities an answer to the query – how good is that qualification?

The general thrust of the Declaration is to establish some kind of common framework that would guarantee the quality of the different European programmes that would be understood by students, employers and society. In essence, it points the way towards some kind of European-wide accreditation / quality assurance system in which the higher education institutions and the national quality agencies would seek to translate national outcomes of evaluations into a European perspective. The European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) which has been in existence since March 2000 is already playing a significant role in monitoring and exchanging information and good practice related to quality assurance in Europe and it may signal the type of framework that will develop at European level. There are concerns, however, that the process could become too bureaucratic as it has in the UK. An alternative approach is to provide accreditation for particular subject areas as the European Foundation for Management Development does for Business Schools, but there seems little immediate prospect of this spreading to other disciplines.

Now is the relevant time, particularly in Ireland, to look more closely at why and how an accreditation perspective might usefully be applied to the existing – and burgeoning – framework for evaluation and quality assurance. One overriding issue is that of securing a European dimension in the future process. During recent months there has been substantial focus on the need for some kind of European organisation to provide a framework for the coming discussions and decisions. ENQA itself constitutes a framework, established by the European Commission and based on a recommendation by the Council of Ministers. This framework for quality assurance in European higher education is already in place and working – despite the criticism previously noted. The Association of European Universities (CRE) launched a project in 2000 with the aim of exploring the context and the feasibility of accreditation as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Salamanca Convention on European Higher Education Institutions 29-30 March 2001. Over 300 European higher education institutions and their main representative organisations gathered in Salamanca. Their purpose was to prepare their input to the Prague meeting of the Ministers in charge of higher education in the countries involved in the Bologna process.

European solution to the challenges of internationalisation generally and the framework of Bologna specifically. The CRE project concludes with a recommendation to set up a 'European Platform' of the higher education institutions, involving also students, quality assurance and accreditation agencies and network, professional organisations, recognition centres as well as national and regional higher education authorities. Great care must be taken in the completion of such a platform. On the one hand, it is doubtful whether a very diversified platform composed of members with divergent basic interests could realistically be expected to proceed towards more operational solutions, including pilot projects. On the other hand, a platform should not be the responsibility of only one of the participants, so that there can be no reason to distrust the credibility of the outcome from the start.

The history of quality assurance in Irish third-level education, with much of the emphasis on accreditation rather than audit and inspection will allow the country to embrace the main thrust of Bologna more easily than other signatories. The new statutory arrangements are timely and within the context of the Bologna Declaration. Perhaps it is the Aristotelian end of quality for Ireland, just as it is beginning.

### **References**

- An Roinn Oideachais, 1992, *Education for Changing World* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair).
- An Roinn Oideachais, 1995, Government White Paper, *Charting our Education Future* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair).
- Clancy, P., 1989, 'The evolution of policy in third level education' in Mulcahy, D. G. and O'Sullivan, D., (Eds.) *Irish Education Policy: Process and Substance* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration).
- Mulcahy, D. G. and O'Sullivan, D., (Eds.) 1989 *Irish Education Policy: Process and Substance* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration).
- National Education Convention Secretariat (NECS), 1994, Report on the National Education Convention (Dublin).