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The roles of leadership and ownership in building an effective quality culture

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Abstract

The search for consensual, effective and meaningful agreements over the purposes, means and outcomes of quality assurance continues to tax the inventiveness (and at times, patience) of academics, administrators and other stakeholders in many institutions of higher education, educational systems and quality assurance agencies. Studies into several systems reveal that there are significant differences of opinion between key stakeholders, particularly about the effectiveness, appropriateness and insightfulness of operating schemes and new proposals. Yet internal and external monitors of quality assurance claim that progress is being made, quality assured, even enhanced, albeit whilst simultaneously identifying weaknesses and gaps which need to be addressed.

One pivotal aspect surrounds the ways in which both departments/programmes within institutions and institutions as a whole in responding to external agencies position themselves in the handling of quality assurance. The array of responses is complex, multi-stranded and often evolutionary, however the relative weighting of two components, strategy and tactics, appears to be highly influential. Predominately tactical responses, it is argued, may succeed, in terms of the outcomes of external evaluations of quality assurance but are unlikely to build either an institutional or system-wide culture of quality assurance and continuous improvement. The evidence that has been gained over the past decade of quality assurance in higher education points to the centrality of strategy over tactics, and within the former, to the need to align leadership with ownership, and internal cultures with quality cultures.

Introduction

One of the significant trends affecting higher education in many countries in the later years of the twentieth century has been an increased attention to several aspect of teaching, learning and assessment. These developments were a product of a complex and shifting array of factors and forces, including:

- the shift in many developed countries to mass systems of higher education, with associated changes in the composition, experiences, needs and even aspirations, of the students;
- the dissemination of innovations and the lessons learned from research into the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching and learning in higher education;
- the requirements of external procedures for the accountability for standards of student achievement and evidencing of sound and robust approaches to the quality assurance of programmes in higher education;
- the influence of information and communications technology on teaching and learning;
- the changing needs of societies and expectations of employers which appeared to place a greater premium upon key skills (transferable skills), the importance of learning to learn, and the regular use of higher order skills such as problem-solving, analysis, interpretation and synthesis, within teams and across a range of topics and situations;
- the progressive unfolding of the implications for teaching and learning both of the knowledge explosion and of the use of the Internet
- more selectively geographically, attempts to redefine the conceptualisation of scholarship within the academy to embrace teaching, application and integration in addition to discovery (research).

Controversies and findings

Considerable debate continues to surround definitions of quality in higher education, the effectiveness and appropriateness of approaches to quality assessment and assurance and the implications of these for various stakeholders. The penetrating analysis of reform in higher education by Kogan and Hanney (2000) concluded that the systems for quality assessment in the UK shifted the balance of power within institutions, as the centre acquired a strengthened monitoring role. Kogan and Hanney (2000, p.188) distinguished between technical, generic and systemic quality. Quality assessment and assurance sharpened interest in generic and systemic quality and heightened the potential role of central institutional interests and responsibilities. That said, assessments, and accreditation or validation by professional bodies, are invariably conducted by academic peers and inevitably involve the sphere of technical quality, i.e. the specialist expertise of individuals or teams of practitioners.

van Vught and Westerheijden (1993) identified four common elements in the emerging approaches to the external assurance of quality in higher education in European Union countries, namely:

- oversight by a system-wide co-ordinating body;
- the centrality of the use of a critical self-evaluation;
- the use of academic peers as assessors/evaluators;
- the publication of a final report.

Brennan (1999, p. 223) accepted these broad common features but cautioned that detailed differences occurred in terms of approaches, context, emphasis and ownership. He explored the controversy over the language of quality, which has tended to sit somewhat uncomfortably with that of academic disciplines, sometimes appearing to academics as 'imperialistic, a spurious quasi-discipline with suspicious links to management' (Brennan, 1999, p. 225).

Debates about ownership are profoundly influenced by context and tradition. Put simply the responses and concerns of academics about issues of ownership and of shifts in the balance of power are influenced by the tradition of relationships (along a spectrum of central control to substantial independence and autonomy) between higher education institutions and the state (or state-sponsored agencies). Notwithstanding these nuances, Brennan (1999, p. 227) observed that ‘All parties to the debates are in favour of quality but each feels that it, better than the others, knows best how to achieve it (and what it is); and, at least in some systems and institutions, each mistrusts the motives and agendas of the others’.

In many countries fashion for the public accountability of the use of public funds has contributed to the introduction of the external monitoring and assessment of increasingly detailed aspects of the work of institutions of higher education. Additionally the expansion and diversification of many systems of higher education reinforced the arguments for accountability. For example the author can recollect an interview, several years ago, with the Vice-Chancellor of a large Australian university, who reported a leading Australian employer commenting that he was struggling to understand the range and standards of qualifications for the enlarged and united Australian system.

The expression of similar views by employers in other countries, especially small employers which governments tend to view as important seedbeds for economic growth, has produced the requirement that external assessment and audits of quality will provide readable public information about standards and levels of achievement, in addition to promoting critical self-evaluation and a climate of intra-institutional and inter-institutional quality enhancement.

Based upon case-studies drawn from 15 OECD countries, Brennan (1999, pp 233–4) distinguished four broad types of quality systems, namely: academic; managerial; pedagogic; employment/professional. Some systems are mixtures of two or more of these, although Brennan and his colleagues concluded that, at any point in time, each system would have a dominant emphasis. Since these systems are dynamic, indeed in some the degree of change, or evolution over relatively short timescales has been quite marked, there is also likely to be an emergent emphasis. For example, Brennan suggested that the professional/employment focus would heighten in the new procedures of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and subsequent developments suggest that the balance between the pedagogic and the employment/professional is altering, with the former waning and the latter waxing.

Reporting upon a detailed investigation into academic responses to quality reforms in higher education in England and Sweden, Bauer and Henkel (1999, p. 258) concluded that in England the impact had been more powerful and competitive, whereas the formative Swedish audits had encouraged institutional control. Nonetheless both systems had adopted elements of new public management and, within institutions ‘the simultaneous pursuit of centralisation and decentralisation ...’. One consequence was ‘a shift from the discipline to the enterprise in terms of the focus of academic attention and, in some cases, the locus of initiatives affecting academic work’ (Bauer and Henkel, 1999, p. 259). However, their research also revealed the resilience and continuing influence of academic tribes (Becher 1989), with academics ‘seeking as far as possible to accommodate the new pressures on them, such as alternative definitions of quality, new educational needs and heavier administrative burdens, within their existing conceptual and value frameworks and traditional *modus operandi*’ (Bauer and Henkel, 1999, p. 259). Bauer and Henkel deduced that institutions often acted as mediators between academics and outside pressures and agencies, in the process seeking to protect shared interests and values whilst avoiding the dangers of stasis.

Establishing rigorously testable generalisations about the views on, and the impact of, quality assurance and assessment is a daunting task. Consequently it is often easier to highlight differences, disagreements and debates. Nonetheless many analysts, as the foregoing illustrations have indicated, have made careful interpretations and general conclusions. For example, Kember (2000, p. 22) in arguing that both quality assurance *and* enhancement are important, suggested that more attention could usefully be paid to evaluating the impact of adjustments to the relative balance. He also posited that approaches to quality based upon interpretative or critical paradigms might be more valuable than those based upon positivist traditions. That is certainly an area worthy of investigation given the broadly normative thrust which underpins the codes of practice and guidelines articulated by many external monitoring and evaluating agencies.

Goodlad (1995) in a wide-ranging discussion of the quest for quality in higher education, aired sixteen heresies, several of which could lead to unwelcome, or unintended outcomes if uncritical approaches to quality assurance and assessment were adopted.

These included:

- utilitarianism (seeing learning as a means to a social end) (p. 28)
- survivalism (an over-emphasis on supplying job skills) (p. 29)
- pedagogicism (over-planning education) (p. 48)
- occupationalism (over-emphasis on the needs of industry or the demands of the discipline) (p49)
- mechanism (treating people as part of a system and neglecting personality) (p. 50)
- sponsorism (distorting accountability by over-prescription. Goodlad referred specifically to research but logical it could also apply to teaching) (p. 75).
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Despite these pitfalls Bowden and Marton (1998, p. 244) argued positively and persuasively that it is ‘the quality of what you are achieving; of the learning brought about and of the research carried out. So improving the ‘quality’ is simply doing better what you are doing any way’.

Fitting into ‘normal’ work, roles and practices is acquiring greater urgency as studies show increasing levels of pressures upon the academy and individual academics (cf. *Unhealthy Places for Learning: Working in Australian Universities*. Report for NTEU, Australia, 2000). Discussions are reportedly taking place in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to specify an element for the scholarship of teaching (academic updating) within future funding of teaching. Arguably that should also recognise an allowance for time for reflection, an essential element of effective developmental quality practice.

Conceptions of leadership in higher education

Views of leadership are manifold, embracing formal and informal (and indeed emergent) leadership, hierarchical (layered) and multi-centred. The literature also recognises subtle relationships between leadership and management and between both of these and values, cultures and practices.

In her seminal study on *Leading Academics*, Middlehurst (1993) outlined five popular conceptions of leadership. namely:

- being in charge
- setting directions
- influencing outcomes
- commanding a following
- being set apart from others
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Generally academic leadership is now seen as an active process, in which the leader has distinctive roles or functions, including symbolic ones, typified within the academy by the concept of *primus inter pares*, which is a potent feature amongst those holding elected offices.

Reflecting upon the changing nature of higher education and relationships to the state and society, Smith *et al.* (1999, p. 284) commented that, 'Earlier charismatic or collegial models of universal leadership have been replaced by a new model which emphasises managerial skills that are both bureaucratic and entrepreneurial'.

In essence these trends reflect shifts in the complex cultures of universities with corporate entrepreneurial and bureaucratic components gaining greater attention from leaders. However the translation of these into action may also require greater expertise in negotiation, in defining and fostering development and in articulating and agreeing shared institutional values and priorities, which meaningfully transcend levels and unite the various groups and diverse interests within, and of, the institution (for example, . all students, all staff, parents, lay governors, alumni, employers, funders etc.).

Middlehurst (1993) and other writers have explored the cultural traditions and constraints which impinge upon, and to varying degrees, define and bound, the nature of the leadership role in institutions of higher education and indeed in many other professional institutions. At the heart of the matter is the argument that the leader's 'right' to influence must be acknowledged by the individuals in the community and earned by those aspiring to leadership through exemplifying particular values, by providing benefits to individuals and groups that would otherwise be unavailable to them and by serving the diverse interests of the university community' (Middlehurst, 1993, p75).

In many systems of higher education a combination of trends and pressures have strengthened the centralised, or corporate, dimensions of institutional leadership and management. Interpreting, handling and shaping complexity, ambiguity, and paradox, whilst addressing the varied and various interests of a multiplicity of stakeholders, internal and external, is now a major part of the job of institutional leadership. Yet the essence of the academy remains an assemblage, albeit somewhat more firmly coupled than previously, of component parts, (departments, centres, units and programmes) and since much of the specialised and detailed expertise of the institution rests there, there are continuing and crucial roles for leadership for heads of department/centres/units and for programme directors/leaders.

In many institutions, in the 1990's there has been a shift in the locus of leadership and management, with some diminution of the powers of committees, in favour of a multi-centred leadership model which consigns significant duties to specific postholders. In that formulation, senior central or faculty committees, now often act primarily as advisory and/or monitoring bodies, including being fora for the accountability of leaders.

Quality assurance and enhancement could conceivably be defined, designed, dictated, delivered and monitored centrally within an institution of higher education. Indeed some might perceive that strategy as a simple way of ensuring consistency and coherence. Not only would that conflict sharply with the culture of the academy but it would court the likelihood of hypothetical procedures which either were not translated into practice on the ground or where the application and implementation resulted in high degrees of, often concealed, variance and incoherence. If the foregoing arguments are valid, then it follows that the interface between leadership and ownership is a critical one. Coincident with these arguments is Watson's (2000) reflection that the management of morale, whilst devilishly difficult to measure, is one of the key ingredients of a successful institution.

Because academics closely identify with their discipline, and even more specifically with their precise areas of specialism, the assessment of quality touches upon some of their most deeply-held and central interests and values. These are potentially sensitive matters and critical comments in published reports, even when well short of significant adverse judgements, can affect the morale of individuals and/or course teams/departments. Not surprisingly considerable amounts of leadership time is invested in avoiding such pitfalls because the management of adverse outcomes can be difficult and painful.

Ramsden (1998, p. 141) is convinced that the task of leadership is to gain commitment to a shared vision and then to energise action. Martin (1999) has some reservations about that diagnosis fearing compliance as an outcome rather than commitment and a possible supremacy of action over purpose. Whilst valid concerns, sensitive active multi-centred leadership should facilitate a wide-ranging and active debate about the definition of purposes, values and visions.

In part these arguments overlap with the debate about transactional versus transformational leaders. Sporn (1999, p. 34) in an analysis of several case-studies to illustrate *Adaptive University Structures*, depicted the situation thus:

Transactional leaders respond to institutional needs and emphasize processes of goal achievement. Transformational leaders play a more active role in changing expectations by focusing on outcomes and the resultant advantages for the whole institution.

Building an effective quality culture

Liston (1999, p. 93) highlights seven key criteria for an institutional quality management plan:

- leadership
- policy and planning
- information and analysis
- people
- client focus
- key processes
- outcomes

She considered that it was essential that managers:

- understood and promoted agreed plans and policies
- led by example and sought best practice, thus implicitly or explicitly benchmarking;

- ensured that staff development programmes were in place and their effectiveness monitored;
- disseminated information and rewarded the implementation or development of best practice (Liston, 1999, p. 94)

Harvey and Knight (1996, p. 117) argued that the delivery of a transformative quality approach involved five key elements:

- envisioning quality as a transformative process designed to enhance the student experience
- a bottom-up approach to continuous improvement
- responsiveness and openness as the means of gaining greater trust
- an emphasis upon effective action
- external monitoring which is sensitive to internal procedures (and values)

Conversely they argued that, 'Placing a primacy on accountability and hoping that quality improvement will result is likely to inhibit, rather than encourage, a process of continuous quality improvement' (Harvey and Knight, 1996, p117).

In related vein Kember (2000, p. 211) argued that, 'Most institutions and national systems have a preponderance of quality assurance measures. Where this is the case, it is likely that a redirection of resources towards quality enhancement will be more effective in bringing about an improvement in teaching and learning'. Kember extended the argument to activities within institutions, urging a shift to project-type enhancements and innovations which he believed 'would undoubtedly be favoured by many academics who would prefer to be empowered by their teaching being taken more seriously and initiatives encouraged'.

Institutions can readily be tempted to adopt tactical responses to summative external assessments and audits of the quality of educational provision. Indeed it has been acknowledged that tactical responses may succeed, especially in the short term. The analogy is with the encouragement of deep learning by students and their acquisition of subject and skills mastery, rather than exclusively prioritising examination scores. Of course, both matter and well-constructed assessment will gauge subject and skill mastery and the display of deep learning. Similarly well constructed approaches to quality assessment and audit should encourage equivalent deeper and embedded strategic responses from institutions, departments and programmes rather than a culture of passing a specific test.

Achieving an effective quality culture is a demanding task which is likely to require patience, commitment and widespread involvement (Gordon, 1999a) Indeed the four key principles, commitment, planning, implementation and evaluation, which underpin the Investors in People standard in the UK, which several universities have satisfied and retained, can readily be transposed from the development of people to progressing institutional objectives for the development of a quality culture. Commitment at the highest level is vital to emphasise the centrality of the activities in the agenda of the institution but it is the commitment at the level of the delivery of programmes and services which has the crucial impact. Indeed it is presumably partly for that reason that Liston (1999, p. 96) starts and ends her generic depiction of the key elements in a quality system with client and stakeholder needs.

Harvey, as exemplified by his work at the University of Central England, attaches considerable importance to regular and robust evaluation and consequential actions, based upon a thorough method of seeking feedback on the student experience.

Imrie (1998) in an article arguing that professional development *is* quality assurance, stressed the developmental role of heads of department as well as those of specialist services, key postholders and central (or faculty or departmental) quality committees.

The multiplicity of relevant interests and loci of activity suggest that the multi-centred model of leadership may be a useful and effective means of cultivating a dynamic and broadly-owned quality culture. Within departments and programme teams (and services) anyone can exercise informal leadership. Indeed many new proposals, modifications and innovations originate in that manner. An individual whilst acting as an external examiner, or attending a conference, or discussing with colleagues elsewhere, or reading the literature, can come across an interesting idea, practice or development that might be of relevance and raise the issue for consideration.

Likewise benchmarking and evaluation of feedback can be particularly powerful and insightful tools when applied as close as possible to the point of delivery/primary action. Here more formally recognised leadership is likely to assume greater prominence e.g. the head of department/service or programme leader or departmental director of teaching and learning or year tutor. Nowadays it would be unusual if there were not established channels of communication and consultation, procedures for seeking approval for change and requirements for monitoring and evaluation, and consequential reporting onwards to designated committees or parties of outcomes and recommendations.

Such devolved structures seek to maximise the sense of ownership in the academic peer communities and services within the institution. This strategy seeks to work within the grain of academic sub-cultures and access the strengths which that offers in terms of allegiance, commitment and expertise.

However, external procedures for quality assurance, understandably, expect that overarching principles will guide practices within institutions. Thus an effective quality culture involves the articulation of shared (trans-institutional) perspectives, values, procedures and approaches to practice. The precise consequences for leadership depend upon the organisational structure of each institution but it commonly involves a small number of key central postholders and committees, often closely interconnected to equivalent groups at the level of Faculties or Schools. Thus at the University of Strathclyde the key central postholders are the Senior Academic Officer with the quality of teaching and learning portfolio, the Academic Registrar and the Director of Academic Practice. For several years the key central committee has been the Academic Quality Assurance Group, which in addition to these three postholders, includes the Vice-Dean (Academic) of each of the five Faculties and the President of the Students Association.

Liston (1999) would view all of these individuals as ‘drivers’ and ‘enablers’ in building an effective quality culture in the institution. At Strathclyde this is done through negotiation and widespread discussion but considerable effort is made to ensure that these individuals are especially well-briefed and informed about developments, in the UK and elsewhere. In Strathclyde’s structure Vice-Deans play a crucial and complex set of roles which enables the institution’s preference for devolved responsibility and localised ownership to be welded together into a coherent whole, guided by shared unifying but not overprescriptive, values and procedures that shape practice in the numerous academic programmes.

Bowden and Marton (1998, p. 240) highlighted seven key elements of the quality assurance system at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. In essence the focus is upon teaching teams. These are expected to take responsibility and work together to progress, document and report annually on continuous improvement. Support comes from an academic development group. Courses are audited on a five-year cycle.

Tannock and Jackson (2000) reported on a two year project sponsored by the Engineering Professors' Council in the UK in which six university engineering departments experimented with the use of benchmarking as a possible means of improving quality management and standards. 'Engagement in the process revealed to participants that qualitative benchmarking is a proper academic process with valuable academic outcomes..... The information generated in this way provided the basis for discussion and enabled a deeper understanding of the relationship between academic practice, processes and context' (Tannock and Jackson, 2000, p. 65).

Funding bodies in the UK, Australia, Hong Kong and elsewhere, have sponsored discipline-based and broader innovative developmental projects related to teaching and learning (Gordon, 2000a; HEFCE, 1998; Kember, 2000). Invariably a requirement of this funding is that the innovation is disseminated to other institutions or relevant peer communities, with the explicit intention of fostering quality enhancement. Institutions have also funded developmental projects as part of their teaching and learning strategies/quality enhancement strategies. These initiatives capture the enthusiasm of individuals, although it is quite difficult to precisely quantify the outcomes, in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency of dissemination, or of adoption and adaptation.

Concluding Remarks

'The challenge facing universities through the world is one of adjusting prevailing cultures to secure closer alignment of individual and collective goals, so that the sum of individual performance is accurately reflected in aggregate performance. In my view that is more likely to be achieved through accessing of Bergquist's (1992) four cultures of the academy (collegial, managerial, negotiating and developmental) than by centralist attempts at micro-management. As part of the strategy we need to sharpen the concept and definition of professionalism in universities. We also need to cultivate a climate of individual responsibility within a clearly understood and shared set of institutional policies and strategies that form a coherent framework or ethos' (Gordon, 1999b, p12).

Partnership is becoming a fashionable term to describe sets of internal and external relationships for quality assurance. The author has explored this topic elsewhere (Gordon, 2000b, p. 76) and it is certainly one which merits attention and clarification, particularly of the concepts of 'mutuality' and of 'psychological' partnerships. 'Here 'psychological' partnership is used to focus upon the perceptions which each partner has of the relationships, formal and informal, especially when these are not generated by the general definition of partnership that would apply in business. Experience indicates that these situations can occur within institutions, as well as between formally independent interests'.

One only needs to read the *Handbook for Academic Review* (QAA, 2000) to realise that audits and assessments of quality in higher education set agendas, construct definitions and explicitly seek to influence practice. Of course, the QAA would, justifiably, argue that their processes and procedures were the outcome of extensive consultation with. and

developmental work involving, the UK higher education institutions. The challenge for both internal and external processes and procedures is to listen carefully to supporters and critics and to foster experimentation and evaluation, and facilitate purposeful diversity.

‘ - easy to say but hard to do openly, honestly and convincingly. Yet these are likely to be essential climatic factors that would help nurture the building of creative internal and external partnerships committed to developing a quality culture.’ (Gordon, 2000b, p. 76). They may also be a pre-requisite for effective dynamic systems that might become characteristic of the emergent world of borderless higher education, however that term materialises more precisely in the next five to ten years.

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