

The End of Quality?

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This is a special issue reporting the outcomes of discussions and some of the papers presented at *The End of Quality?* seminar held in Birmingham, UK, in May 2001. The seminar discussion was structured around three themes, presented in an opening scene-setting keynote. The views of delegates about each theme are summarised below, under the scene-setting bullet points. In addition, there were keynote and parallel presentations and versions of these are also included in this volume.

Theme 1: has external quality review had its day

It has been suggested that external quality monitoring:

- leads to bureaucratisation and inflexibility;
- is incapable of asking the right questions and that 'visits' are amateurish and fail to observe what really goes on in higher education institutions;
- leads to 'game playing' and 'performance';
- has no real impact especially on student learning;
- leads to short-term response, not permanent cultural changes;
- has a superficial impact on standards;
- is obsessed with accountability but should encourage internal quality improvement and external 'useful' information.

External Quality Monitoring

External quality monitoring (EQM) includes accreditation (of institutions and programmes), institutional quality audit or assessment, programme assessment or review, external evaluation and comparison of standards, research reviews and assessment undertaken by bodies external to the institution, including government ministries, specially created agencies and professional bodies.

Internal-External

It was noted that, for many people working in higher education, external monitoring also includes 'internal-external', namely, any assessment, review or evaluation of departmental or discipline activities by others from outside the department or discipline area, which might include such things as internal audits of procedures, monitoring of programme pass rates, and teaching evaluation done centrally or at faculty level.

Bureaucracy

It was felt that any form of external quality monitoring would involve some level of 'bureaucracy'. Bureaucracy refers to both the organisation of the external monitoring

process and the process by which such monitoring takes place. The key issue is not so much the existence of a bureaucracy or of bureaucratic processes but the nature of the bureaucracy and its processes. External monitoring is not *per se* inherently faulty or oppressive. Each country must ensure its own balance between bureaucracy and development and must ensure it meets needs of external and internal stakeholders.

Quality Bureaucracies

There was little discussion of the regulatory or statutory power, auspices and independence of quality monitoring bureaucracies. It was noted that such bureaucracies should, primarily, serve the stakeholders in higher education. It was proposed that quality monitoring bureaucracies should be flexible and enabling rather than controlling. Higher education institutions have changed and EQM bodies should also be prepared to adapt and be flexible. Quality monitoring bureaucracies, it was suggested, have three main roles.

Integrity

First, to ensure the integrity of higher education, including international integrity, through something akin to an accreditation procedure. In many senses, the context and stage of development of higher education within any system is a key variable. The more new (private) development the more is the need for institutional accreditation. In the US, for example, institutional accreditation with established institutions is not providing much return on the monitoring process.

The presumption by governments and (their) agencies that integrity is maintained or assured by quality assessment or audit processes was not wholeheartedly endorsed. Many delegates were sceptical of controlling, accountability-oriented interventions by external agencies.

Catalyst

Second, there was a clear view that the primary purpose of quality monitoring bureaucracies should be to act as catalysts for internal improvement within institutions. This role requires dialogue and advice as part of the monitoring procedure and the renewal of a trusting relationship between external body and institutions. The emphasis on dialogue and support in the audit process in Sweden was, for example, compared favourably to the British process.

In particular, there was scepticism that using particular performance indicators (such as retention) achieves real improvement. On the contrary, it encourages manipulation of data by institutions to meet targets. There was a preference for 'continuous improvement' and process-driven quality improvements. Such processes will, it was argued, generate their own performance indicators, which will be owned by institutions and will measure real improvement.

On a broader front it was argued that EQM should stimulate debate on what quality means in an era of mass higher education.

Conduit

Third, quality monitoring bureaucracies should act as conduits for information to various stakeholders, including prospective students, employers and funders. This information

provision was the preferred form of any accountability role required of agencies (which some delegates considered inevitable). However, it was suggested that information provided by quality monitoring bureaucracies should be 'qualitative' and informative rather than summative, quantitative evaluations of dubious statistical validity. In any event, there was a feeling that private agencies would produce league tables irrespective of any quality monitoring (see below, Theme 2). It was argued, though, that quality monitoring is not necessarily the best way to provide the appropriate information. Research may provide much better analysis and more reliable information more cost effectively.

There was also an issue of what models underlay information provision—for example, there is a tendency to assume a consumerist model of learning (and hence implicit comparison of what students can expect) rather than a participatory model of learning (which requires information that enables students to identify what is best for their learning style).

Quality Process

There was much more discussion about the 'bureaucratic process' of external quality monitoring than of the bureaucracies themselves. The discussion focused on:

- the type of quality processes;
- self-assessment;
- the nature of the engagement with quality monitoring;
- the burden of external monitoring;
- the perceived legitimacy of the process;
- the effectiveness in encouraging improvement;
- the longevity of the process;
- the impact on learning;
- student feedback.

Type

There was some discussion about the focus of external monitoring: whether it should be at the programme, subject or institutional level. In the main, though, it was less the organisational focus that was of concern than the purpose of the activity.

The dominant approach is self-assessment followed by peer review supported by statistical data. This was not necessarily seen as the best approach. Many delegates were supportive of the Irish model which had three elements: a national 5-year review based on self-evaluation, active external examining and the appointment of international experts as supportive critical friends. The focus is on the learning environment rather than bureaucratic procedures.

Self-assessment

Many respondents reaffirmed the well-established anecdotal view that the main value of external monitoring is the internal self-reflection that it engenders. There is, though, a distinction that must be drawn between self-evaluation for internal use and self-evaluation for external consumption. Even at the early stages of the introduction of external monitoring this distinction is drawn, especially when the external evaluation is linked to accountability criteria—particularly any link, direct or indirect, to funding.

At worse, this leads to 'two sets of books', one for internal consumption and one, including required performance indicators, that is 'embellished' for external consumption. This embellishment appears to be irrespective of whether quality monitoring includes publication. This lack of openness is because universities fear revealing weaknesses or problems in self-evaluation because, in many countries, resources are used to reward strengths rather than combat weaknesses.

Engagement with the Process

It was clear from the discussions that the nature of the engagement of institutions and academics with the external processes was heavily mediated by the perceived short-term effect of the process. Dual 'self-evaluation' was indicative of this. There were many references to 'game playing' and compliance with external requirements and 'performance' to ensure maximum return from monitoring processes, whether it be financial rewards, allocation of extra student numbers, or safeguarding reputations. It was suggested that this 'game playing' took many forms, some of which clearly obscured the reality of the situation. In some cases, for example, institutional managers went so far as requiring staff to present a particular image of the institution even when the staff were opposed to it or knew it to be a misrepresentation.

However, there was little evident surprise expressed that institutions and academics should 'play the game' for maximum effect: this was seen as a 'natural' outcome of accountability-oriented processes. The concern was that, in some systems, particularly 'mature' ones, the game playing was taking up far too much time and resources for very little real return. The British system, for example, may have initially encouraged better documentation but, by 2001, has deteriorated into a compliance game in which many resources that could otherwise be used for improvement are being diverted to fulfil external monitoring requirements.

Burden

There was a concern expressed by those countries newly developing systems, such as South Africa and Australia, that the past experience of other countries indicates that institutions and academics would be faced by a heavy burden of extra work. Delegates from countries with existing systems were of accord that monitoring processes, however benign, imposed an unnecessary bureaucratic burden. It was argued that, in some small countries, the process is excessive. For example, Denmark is a small homogenous society and higher education does not need heavy accountability machinery. Indeed, it was suggested that there is actually no need for explicit demonstrations of standards.

A central feature of the excessive burden was the time taken in preparing for monitoring events, in particular, the requirement to prepare specific event-related documentation. Rather than ask for specific documents, agencies should evaluate on the basis of what institutions already produce. If the evaluation, for example, reveals that the institution does not provide adequate material to students about assessment criteria, then this should be noted for future action. Requiring specially produced documents for reviews was considered bad enough but the expectation that academics should produce ongoing detailed documentation for monitoring purposes, such as required in the current British system, was seen as entirely unacceptable. Such activities divert scarce resources from the key tasks of higher education: namely, the improvement of the learning and experience for students and the development of research and scholarship.

Legitimacy

A key issue is the legitimacy of EQM systems and how far it is supported by academics. It was considered important that monitoring processes should be collaborative and not perceived as something being 'done to' an institution or department. The process needs to be one that encourages willing engagement and positive use of the process to help institutions, departments and individuals develop and improve their outputs: which may be enabling student learning, knowledge through research or community involvement. In which case external monitoring should include institutional and system-wide *interactive* debriefing (not just summary reports) as, for example, in the New Zealand system.

Academics, it was argued, consider some internal–external processes as credible and legitimate such as external examining and departmental reviews, which external monitoring should not displace. It was noted that universities have very different attitudes to funding of research linked to external assessment compared with funding linked to evaluation of teaching. Research assessment is often perceived as somehow more legitimate. One explanation might be the greater the degree of difficulty (real or perceived) associated with measurement of teaching (Staffan Wahlén addresses this issue in his contribution below). However, many delegates were of the view that evaluation of teaching is a critically important objective of quality monitoring. Whether this is best achieved through internal processes, peer visits or professional inspection was a moot point.

In the end, to be legitimate, the purpose and goals of any external (or internal–external) monitoring need to be clear. Furthermore, external agencies should not adopt a policing role. Rather external processes should be supportive, aiding improvement in institutions and the system as a whole.

Impact on Improvement

A major area of discussion was the effectiveness of quality monitoring in aiding and embedding improvement. A key issue was how to ensure that any results of external monitoring processes are not just temporary adjustments but result in lasting improvement. There is considerable evidence that the initial impact fades away quickly, especially if there is no significant connection between internal and external processes. External monitoring must interact with internal quality systems: the real benefits, it was argued, are products of the external–internal dialogue.

Thus, the issue was how to embed cultural changes that may result from quality monitoring processes. Such changes do not occur quickly, nor do they occur if the participants (students, staff, institutional leaders) are not committed to them. It was noted that there is a 'paranoia shift' amongst staff in higher education institutions from a fear of who will be targeted by external (or internal–external) processes to cynicism that nothing will happen.

If quality monitoring is seen as an 'event' rather than as a 'process', there is little likelihood of the event making much long-term impact. Rather, it is likely to lead to performance and game playing. The more the process is one of complying with external requirements the less the lasting internal benefits. This whole process is exacerbated by links to funding. It was argued that an inspection-based system, which threatens withdrawal of funding for underperformance, drives institutions to conceal weaknesses rather than engage in self-evaluation and improvement. However, risk to funding, if used sparingly, *can* be effective in some circumstances. More effective, as discussed in Theme 2,

is positive special-initiative funding if government is seeking compliance *and* local ownership of change. If quality monitoring is linked to funding, this can create tensions between rewarding success on the one hand and investing in institutions to support improvement. A good system will promote continuous improvement within the best institutions *and* within those that need to improve performance.

Longevity

It was pointed out that the nature and impact of quality monitoring may be different depending on whether the higher education system and quality assurance are at an early stage of development or well-established. To what extent do processes lose their improvement potential as they become more elaborate, make more demands, and become routinised?

As systems mature, there is the potential to emphasise procedural elements of quality rather than innovative process. The UK process, for example, was seen as an extreme approach that, apart from being extensive and very intrusive, was increasingly requiring documentation of every aspect of teaching to the detriment of the learning experience of students. While an 'event' is an unwelcome and 'unreal' intrusion, continuous monitoring by a controlling agency requiring 'overly bureaucratic procedures' will result in detailed paper trails but entirely stifle development and innovation, leading to a continuous procedurising tendency and loss of academic autonomy.

There was a general feeling that, once external monitoring had started, monitoring should become less frequent. It was suggested that emphasis should be placed on interim internal monitoring, reports of which should go to the external agencies. There is a need for constant reflection and change in EQM but not to make it more intrusive and bureaucratic but the reverse, to give more trust to institutions and to work more collaboratively. This may require a periodic change in both purposes and in the agencies themselves.

The problem is that the bureaucracies become established and politicians are afraid of losing face if agencies are dissolved as this would appear to constitute an admission of failure. EQM risks becoming 'standardised', which may lead to excessive bureaucratisation and inflexibility. Without periodic change, there is the danger of ending up with a British-style, QAA-type system: a rolling 'juggernaut' that is not sure what it is looking for but which ensures compliance and minimises innovation and risk-taking. British institutions continue to comply, even if the return on investment is derisory, because of the fear of loss of funding. Increasingly, it was suggested, the monitors need monitoring.

Efficiency

Thus, overall, there were severe doubts expressed about the efficiency of most external quality monitoring. Apart from the excessive cost to the exchequer of external systems, the internal costs of monitoring, in some countries, are enormous and in no way reflect the value gained from the process. In many systems, the periodic and dramaturgical manifestations of external quality monitoring fail to engage with or help inform change management in institutions.

Furthermore, there was concern that processes are incompatible with broader changes in higher education. Some delegates thought that external quality monitoring inhibits innovation through its conservative or rigid evaluation criteria. On the other hand, quality

processes were seen as a vehicle for the introduction and implementation of government policy (discussed further in Theme 2).

Learning

Although it was felt that 'quality' could be a useful tool for the development of reflective practice in teaching, delegates were extremely sceptical that external quality monitoring had any impact on programme quality or student learning. There is no evidence of clear impact on learning and, indeed, available research suggests that other factors entirely outweigh the impact of external quality monitoring on student learning. The structure and organisation of external quality monitoring is not compatible with empowering staff and students to enhance the learning situation.

Student Feedback

Student feedback is an important element of quality monitoring, especially if the emphasis is on internal processes. However, it is important that the feedback is linked to action and empowerment. Over-evaluation of students, unlinked to action, leads to 'questionnaire fatigue' and cynicism by both students and staff.

The point was made that, in the 1960s, students demanded that their perceptions were taken into account. In the current era there tends to be a need to extol students to provide feedback. It was suggested that this is because student feedback has been 'hijacked' for other purposes. There is a need to ensure that students have ownership of feedback.

There is an incongruity about the engagement with feedback given that students are increasingly contributing to their higher education in most countries. Perhaps the problem is that, in view of this, too much emphasis is placed on a consumerist approach to feedback rather than a participative approach. This may also be exacerbated by a seemingly instrumentalist approach by many students.

Theme 2: has control of quality been usurped by the market and by information technology?

It has been suggested that:

- higher education is a business with a potentially infinite number of providers accessible through the Internet;
- the notion of a bounded location for learning and for research is obsolete;
- quality monitoring is swimming against the tide as the market will ultimately arbitrate on quality;
- monitoring procedures, which might be designed to exclude unacceptable provision, are stifling creativity;
- quality monitoring is about restricting the number of providers and ensuring the pre-eminence of the old order.

Introduction

There was little direct analysis of what a market is or what it would mean in the higher education context. There was a recognition that the notion of a 'market' in higher education needs to be carefully explored—it is not an 'obvious' notion. It was noted that

a decade or so ago a conversation about markets, quality costs, efficiencies and the like would not be taking place; there has been a move toward a market-focused discourse in higher education. What is higher education is marketing? Is it a qualification, an experience, a civic service? There is a difference between selling degrees and selling experience.

Quality Monitoring and Gold Standard

It was generally agreed that whatever the extent and nature of the market, there will be a need for higher education to have quality monitoring processes in place, at the very least accreditation, because the market is neither self-regulating nor will pure competition ensure the retention of the integrity of higher education. There was, thus, an underlying 'gold standard' notion of higher education as an international endeavour. It was implied that higher education encapsulates a certain type of learning experience, usually coupled with research and scholarly activity, and that outcomes of both are of an implicit level or standard. Furthermore, a degree has a universal structure and integrity, which is specified in law in some countries, such as Sweden. There was no expectation, even from within countries with more experience of private-sector provision, that the market could deliver these expectations of higher education unaided. The voluntary accreditation system in the US is testament to the need for external legitimization of the higher education endeavour.

Impact

The 'market' has a different bearing on higher education in the United States to that of most other countries represented at the seminar. The USA apart, there have been warnings for a decade in, for example, New Zealand, that the market will have an impact but little has changed. In the last resort, no universities have been allowed to go bankrupt and the government mediates any pseudo-market impact. Similarly, there is no evidence of promised market forces generally influencing Australian higher education. Political issues influence the degree of influence of market forces. In Australia, for example, a relatively right-wing government is currently encouraging entrepreneurship.

The issue is not that there will be a higher education market, which will determine quality, but that some aspects of a 'market' will impact on higher education either to encourage improvement or possibly to inhibit it. Despite their interconnections, it was also considered necessary to distinguish between the impact of information technology and of the 'market'.

Three issues tended to be discussed. First, the public versus private sector of higher education, which has more relevance in some countries than others, and was discussed briefly. Second, the creation of pseudo-market conditions, by governments, to encourage competition between institutions. Third, the presumption of greater consumer choice and the necessity, therefore, for higher education to respond to customer needs and requirements.

Public Versus Private

Competition between public and private institutions occurs in some countries, while in others, there is no significant private higher education sector. In Sweden and Denmark higher education is free to participants and so there are no private fee-charging universities.

There is some concern about mushrooming private provision in some sectors and the impact on standards. In South Africa, for example, the growth of private institutions is linked to a perceived drop in standards. In India, private providers are 'cherry-picking' most popular programme areas, such as computing and business. In the US, state governments are favourably inclined toward the entrance of private universities as it saves the taxpayer money. The US market is saturated but still more private universities are being established.

The expectation in some countries is that public universities will provide basic 'theoretical' learning and that private universities will focus on lucrative (postgraduation) vocational skill development.

Pseudo-market Conditions

Competition and Efficiency

The pseudo-market has four elements: first, to use competition to improve services and drive down costs. This competition is often linked to moves towards contingent funding, such as performance funding or funding to contract. It was argued that increased competition between institutions *for* students is lowering standards and quality, rather than raising them. Contingent funding, such as performance indicators, acts to distort institutional values and can also lead to corrupt practices.

It was felt that the response to pseudo-markets would be the growth of consortia, both national and international groupings, institutional and subject-based. Indeed, in some areas, such as business, there are already mutual-recognition consortia of various types. There was also the expectation that as higher education globalised and was confronted by market conditions, that there would be mergers between institutions. At its extreme, there may not only be mergers but 'mega universities' (made up of the 'best') or omni-universities (regional, vertical and horizontal networks of post-compulsory education providers and research organisations).

Income Streams

The second element of pseudo-markets is the encouragement of institutions to actively develop other, non-governmental, income streams. This represents a shift in most countries and even in the United States the big public universities, which hitherto had funding with no strings attached, are now having to adapt to performance funding.

Compliance

Third, pseudo-markets have also been used to encourage compliance with government agendas, such as widening access, developing employability for an international labour market and encouraging recruitment to specific disciplines. While some special-initiative funding, or quality-linked funding, has been successful in encouraging compliance, in the last resort supply needs to be met by demand. For example, engineers are in short supply in UK, Ireland and Canada, but higher education institutions have been generally unsuccessful in encouraging students to undertake engineering degrees.

It was noted that there is a general suspicion in higher education of government motives behind their influence on the quality agenda. In the Netherlands, for example, quality

assurance has been used as a means to impose changes in higher education, with a focus on employability. Potentially, such changes could have serious impact on what constitutes higher education, especially if this is led by short-term market demands.

Diversity

The fourth element of pseudo-markets is diversity. On one hand, a diverse system has transformative potential for a wide array of students but, on the other hand, also has the potential to drive down standards. It was argued that while diversity is to be encouraged it is important to ensure that diversity does not mean mediocrity. In most countries, institutions are not free to grow and develop as they like. Often there are controls on expansion and diversification across subjects imposed by the state or its agencies or by professional or regulator bodies. Furthermore, given restriction on the raising of capital and investment in capital projects, there are physical limits on the potential expansion of institutions in most countries.

The main issue was the dilemma of diversity and equivalence. That is, diversity of institutions, providing different student experiences and having different missions and subject focuses, but at the same time ensuring that the student in any institution has an equivalent experience and that the outcomes are the same. This is, to some extent, less of a concern in the United States, although 'Ivy League' institutions are evident in nearly all countries. The difference and equivalence of student experience remained largely unspecified. The implication was that the physical and social experience was different but that the intellectual development was ultimately the same. There was scepticism that any specific model could deliver equivalence without (a) either overly burdensome and rigid and (b) imposing a national (or international) curriculum.

What was also implicit was that diversity applied to research and that there was no intention or need to ensure equivalence between institutions. Indeed, some older universities are obliged to concentrate on research because that is their strength in the 'market-place'.

There was a concern that, in responding to pseudo-markets and consumerism, a growing and unbridgeable divide may occur between elite universities and others resulting in a two-tier system of global, international, institutions operating in self-accrediting consortia, without reference to national quality system, and local and regional universities subject to state control. It was considered essential, by some delegates, to find a means for constructive debate to avoid the worst effects of a university system that is fragmented by the markets into rigid hierarchies that reinforce status distinction rather than encourage and promote diversity.

Given diversity, in pseudo-market conditions, any evaluation of quality must be against the mission of the institution, not some absolute evaluation criteria. These need to be negotiated independently with institutions. There is little evidence of this happening even in mission-based, fitness-for-purpose systems, not least because it inhibits comparative league tables.

Consumer Choice

The consumerist discussion focused on the role of the Internet and the potential for virtual higher education, the increased student choice and the development of students' skills and abilities.

Internet

The Internet was seen as the most significant 'market' challenge. The increasing use of the Internet has led to growing awareness that education is a 'tradable commodity'. Globalisation is a factor, made possible through technological developments. Higher education is no longer confined within national boundaries. However, the Internet was not seen as a threat in the sense of drawing students away from conventional higher education. There has always been a distance-learning market and Internet-based courses simply enhance that sector.

Distance Learning

Whether it is a good idea for institutions to dabble in an electronic distance-learning market is a moot point. It was suggested that the experts such as the OU in Britain and University of Phoenix in the United States have experience and good quality-assurance processes in place which most other institutions cannot match. The involvement in this market by non-specialist institutions, it was suggested, was financially motivated, rather than a real commitment to non-traditional distance learners. In practice, much of this market in non-specialised institutions relates to professional education and continuous professional development.

It was also suggested that, in any country or even language group, there was no real need for more than one e-university. That is, there might, for example, be a single e-university in a country that is a consortium of providers all contributing elements through the Internet, with a central co-ordinating and degree-awarding institution. This is not yet happening. For example, in the United States every state is developing distance learning separately. Internationally, English-speaking institutions/countries will be at an advantage when developing e-learning but also English will be the main site of competition. The University of Phoenix and other e-universities are not a threat to Swedish universities because they are not teaching in Swedish.

E-based distance learning, whether via a specialist provider or as a 'side-line', should still be faced by the same quality-assurance principles as other conventionally delivered programmes. If a registered provider, then the institution needs to conform to explicit quality regulations. There was some concern that on-line learning, because it is 'remote', will undermine quality and quality monitoring. On the other hand, it was suggested that quality monitoring of (wholly) on-line provision can be far more in-depth than an institutional visit for a conventional course because it could be continuous and is unobtrusive: the monitor can simply engage in a manner similar to the on-line student. In short, virtual review could be like snooping on-line. However, support for students will have to be different on-line.

International Quality Monitoring

Globalisation, it was suggested, made it difficult to keep a grip on standards. One potential impact of the intranet, though, may be to encourage a shift to international quality systems or consortia for accreditation. Furthermore, students are demanding assurance that their qualifications will have international currency.

Europe, post-Bologna Declaration, is moving towards a structure in which second-tier accreditation, on a voluntary basis, will serve to 'top up' national quality systems. There has been active discussion in ENQA and Nordic countries about moves towards accredita-

tion and mutual recognition. INQAAHE have also considered their role in any international developments. UNESCO and IMHE are also involved (although GATE has dropped out of the picture now that it has been taken over by commercial sector).

However, there was scepticism about the possibility of 'common standards' in national or international systems. A counter-argument suggested that some professional bodies are operating an international labour market. Furthermore, there was a sceptical view expressed by students that the development of European-Union-wide accreditation will lead to more bureaucracy and that useful information they need could be obtained by less bureaucratic approaches.

The development of virtual learning may stimulate reflection by institutions and encourage them to be cognisant of changing requirements. For example, an e-university started off-shore did act as a stimulus for Australian higher education institutions to look carefully at what was being offered. An example of a *reaction* to market forces and quality issues.

Integration of Internet into Conventional Programmes

The real issue is the integration of the Internet into conventional on-site courses, using it as a tool to complement other forms of learning facilitation. Delivery of courses is changing, for example, the use of conferencing facilities to make contact with students and study materials available electronically rather than hard-copy information. The mechanics of course delivery are different as too are attendance patterns, with more flexible delivery and off-campus support, especially at the postgraduate or continuing-professional-development level, with more part-time study while working full-time. This may or may not be leading to virtual communities of learning.

What has become apparent, in some settings, is that the Internet has been used as a vehicle for providing course organisation material (as well as subject content) and that, as a result, syllabi, course requirements and expectations, assessment criteria and outcomes have become more clearly defined and expressed.

In any event, the integration of the Internet into the conventional programmes requires a reconceptualisation of conventional student assessment practices (grading of student achievement). Apart from anything else, conventional approaches such as requiring essays is prone to extensive plagiarism given available electronic resources. Thus, imagination is required in assessment practices. One area of potential advantage is in the assessment of group working, using electronic resources to monitor group engagement and contributions, which is not easy to do in paper-based assessments. There is also a need to change the way students are assessed so that they can operate effectively once they get into employment; thus some form of assessment of a wider range of abilities is required.

Imaginative integration of the Internet into programmes is time-consuming and does require support for academic staff if the process is to be more than making lecture notes available electronically. It takes a long time and costs a lot to develop interactive programmes and the result needs to have a reasonable shelf-life to make it feasible. The problem is that the pace of change of technology raises expectations amongst stakeholders that higher education finds it increasingly difficult to keep up with.

Making use of the Internet disaggregates courses so they are not 'owned' in the same way as conventional courses. Rather than one person producing their course in its entirety, courses are produced by teams with specialists or by outsourcing aspects. This might lead to problems of quality assurance or it may enhance quality as elements will be undertaken by professionals, such as design and layout experts.

On another front, an institution's website might ultimately be the sole locus of infor-

mation for quality monitoring reviews. Rather than produce large amounts of paper document for monitoring purposes, the reviewers might receive them electronically, or better still, simply dip into the site to see what material is available to (a) the general public and (b) registered students and staff.

Student Choice

One aspect of student choice is the potential mobility of students and the opportunity for degrees, for example, to be 'compiled' both horizontally across institutions or vertically at a number of universities.

Accumulation

Horizontal accumulation arises when students take diverse 'modules' from different discipline areas. The latter makes use of accumulation and credit schemes that enable students to pursue a discipline area by moving from one institution to another, or, in Europe, to take advantage of European Union schemes to take one or more semesters/terms in institutions in other countries.

In practice, few students tend to take up vertical accumulation other than to take part of the time somewhere else. Moving on is not as easy or even possible despite the existence of systems to enable it. A fully free accumulation by taking bits and pieces from a variety of institutions is rare, and not actively encouraged, not least because there is an issue of whose award the varied accumulated modules adds up to. It is doubtful whether the Internet will encourage or enable vertical accumulation.

The Internet gives students more choice as there are, potentially, more providers. However, for the majority of students, the social aspect of learning is central and the Internet provides an adjunct to the learning situation, which allows students more flexibility in the way they learn.

Learning Preferences

There are some circumstances where an electronic, virtual environment provides a better learning experience than a lecture, seminar, television broadcast, or workshop. Students might prefer to use the Internet for information gathering and use face-to-face experiences for engaging with, or developing understandings or critiques of, the information. Similarly, some students may wish to take some modules virtually and others through class contact. Increasing student choice, pragmatism and instrumentalism means that universities will need to adapt to such demands. It has been noted, in New Zealand, for example, that investment in an institution's intranet has been matched by a decline in attendance, suggesting that students want choice and variety. This may be in part due to more instrumentalist approaches by students, who increasingly have paid work commitments, or as a result of changes in student cognitive processes due to exposure to a wide variety of media.

Student Influence

The possibility for Internet delivery for all or part of a programme gives students more choice and a greater influence on curriculum design. While this can be a positive step to empower students, it is important to balance the different perspectives of stakeholders,

the short-term perspectives of students, for example, with longer-term perspectives of employers.

Another element of student influence is the growing student litigiousness observable in some countries. Students want value for money and, for some delegates, this suggested a need for a more defensive type of quality monitoring that helps provide protection from litigation.

League Tables

One element of consumer choice, which cuts across government attempts to create a pseudo-market and links to the involvement of private-sector, non-higher education organisations, is the production of 'league tables'. More and more league tables are appearing in various parts of the world, as a way of bringing market forces more directly to bear on higher education. The United States has a long history of media-based league tables of institutions. In other countries these are in their infancy and are often crude and based on limited, or even faulty, data. However, it is unlikely in a global higher education environment that league tables of various types will not remain.

The view was that constructing league tables should not be a primary, or even secondary, role of quality monitoring processes. Information to stakeholders, an accepted function of quality monitoring, should concentrate on providing qualitative data that allows potential users to make an evaluation of what suits them, rather than quantitative, summative assessments that presume some kind of absolute standards or benchmarks. Some delegates thought that markets are shaped or distorted by league tables. Others went further and regarded league tables as dangerous, not only because they are often commercial and based on superficial research, but because they impede continuous quality improvement by emphasising the punishment of institutions perceived to be inferior.

Marketable Skills

It was also suggested that, increasingly, political and economic imperatives are placing more emphasis on institutions to produce students with particular skills. Market forces will usually see that these skills are addressed. However, market forces place an emphasis on short-term outcomes. It was argued that, in some countries, employers generally want short, sharp programmes that deliver particular skills to students in, say, 6 months. But these newly-acquired skills will soon be out-of-date and redundant. In other countries, such as the UK, employers are aware of this and are more concerned that undergraduate study develops understandings of basic principles and produces graduates with generic skills rather than specific subject skills. Nonetheless, there is a need for institutions to address some of these required generic skills rather more explicitly, although it is important to be aware that some employer demands are rhetoric rather than reality. There was some concern that, if higher education did not produce graduates more suited to employer needs, employers will provide what they need themselves.

The role of the university also involves the development of the whole person and, if it is just left to market forces, it is unlikely that this aspect of a university's work would occur. In short, a market-led approach would lead to more emphasis on piecemeal training rather than holistic education. Broader student experience will not be catered for if just market forces are in operation. Furthermore, if academia just responded to market forces, universities would produce numerous accountants but not many artists and musicians. Nonetheless, the market demands for graduates heavily influences the demand of students

for particular discipline degrees. It is, thus, necessary that institutions respond to market forces but in a proactive way, with universities leading the way forward.

Impact

Overall, there was a feeling for many delegates that it was too soon to tell what impact technology and market forces would have on higher education. There is a shared view that universities will increasingly be under pressure from both market forces and new modes of delivery. However, there was uncertainty about the direction in which these pressures would move the sector. It was clear, though, that there was no confidence the market would ever be able to self-regulate and there would need to be some form of assurance to stakeholders about the integrity of higher education. This did not need, though, to be in the current dominant form of intrusive monitoring by external agencies.

Rather than a concern about how the 'market' might usurp quality, the focus was on how the Internet might enhance the student experience and how the recruitment market impacts on the type of graduate produced in a widening system. There is a clear employability agenda that seems to cover all countries represented and the pressure is on higher education to be responsive to (a) employer demands, (b) government economic requirements and (c) student expectations of graduate abilities, while remaining true to the fundamental higher education mission of developing higher-order skills of critique, synthesis and analysis along with an understanding of fundamental principles of a specific subject area.

Theme 3: does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?

It has been suggested that with the advent of mass higher education that:

- standards of achievement cannot be maintained especially where resources are cut and students have to do more paid work in order to pay for higher education;
- higher education is changing and student outcomes are different now than a decade ago;
- there are different demands from employers about the nature of graduates;
- nonetheless, there is grade inflation, which may not be affecting the top standards but is leading to more 'passes' at the bottom end;
- there are external pressures to increase pass rates, which will affect standards;
- external checks are concealing the drop in standards and the reduction in the unit of resource.

Mass Higher Education

It was generally taken-for-granted that countries were moving towards 'mass' higher education, even if the participation rate was varied between countries. There was not much attempt to define what mass higher education is, but its implications were fairly clear. At root, mass higher education was seen as:

- an attempt to increase the level of education, skills and abilities of a country's workforce;
- necessarily leading to the recruitment of students less well qualified at entry than is the case in an 'élite' system,
- necessitating greater value added from the system if there is to be no decline in 'standards';

- having resource implications as most governments are not prepared to fully fund expansion of higher education;
- resulting in access and equal opportunity issues.

All of this suggests that, in an era of mass higher education, value-added transformation ought to become the central element of any concept of quality rather than ‘excellence’, ‘fitness for purpose’ or ‘value for money’. It was considered unfortunate that so little advance has been made on developing value-added approaches or measures. Although it might be difficult to measure student progress in any quantifiable way, some delegates suspected that there was no political will to develop value-added, not least because it might turn conventional league tables upside-down.

Student Experience

There was a general view that massification gives rise to concerns about the quality of the student experience, especially with large classes. Similarly, large classes limit the extent and speed of assessment feedback, which is an important element of student learning. Sometimes more useful, potentially formative assessments are replaced by simple summative assessments, such as multiple-choice assessments that are far less useful for students in developing their understanding. This is seen as a lowering of the standard of service to students, reflected in lower student satisfaction.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between academic standards (of student achievement or ability), service standards provided by institutions, the quality of the higher education experience and student satisfaction. Mass higher education has led to decreased funding per head, since more students rarely mean proportionate increase in funding. This has led to more pressure on resources including staff time and increased class size. It has also meant that, in some situations, the demand and expansion in the system entirely outstrips the level of resourcing. In South Africa, for example, a class in information technology may have 900 people but there will not be anything like that number of computers. In the US there is a move with large classes to have ‘professorial staff’ as ‘course designers’—the actual teaching is done by postgraduate students and in some cases students rarely, if ever, meet full-time teaching staff. In the extreme situation, is external quality monitoring relevant in situations in which the system (or institution) must and will ‘soldier on’ no matter what the state of its resources or irrespective of the quality of its results?

The resource issue has also resulted in students undertaking more paid work working to support themselves at college or university, according to recent studies in Ireland and the Netherlands.

Nonetheless, there was a general agreement that mass education did not mean the end of quality, in the sense of the end of a quality student experience. Although, for example, mass education involves a different level of engagement with teaching staff, this is not necessarily indicative of a worsening of the quality of the student experience. Mass higher education involves a different experience.

There is a need to constantly reassess what makes a high quality educational experience—the nature and purpose of higher education is changing. Modern ‘credit’ systems that are associated with mass education are very different from, but not necessarily worse than, traditional degree systems. It is not just mass higher education that has led to changes in the nature and purposes of higher education. Changes are taking place as a result of a variety of external influences, such as the need to teach transferable skills, lifelong learning,

continuing professional development. Indeed, it could be argued that higher education is changing as a result of external requirements, which is leading to mass higher education.

The original university was to train priests, doctors and the 'educated aristocracy'—the élite. This is very definitely not the current need of society. Instead, what is required is 'academic content' and 'key skills' to equip graduates for social and work roles. There were some delegates who thought the quality of outcomes is now more important than the quality of the processes. However, for others, the key issue is the range of learning (not just subject knowledge) but particularly how students are facilitated to become empowered learners. Learning how to learn was seen as most important and this involved a shift in focus from teaching to learning.

With the growing focus on employability, work experience is an important part of the student experience of higher education. While sandwich courses may become more popular, there are potential problems of who will pay as students take longer to graduate. There are, of course, other forms of work experience than formal sandwich courses.

There appeared to be consensus that mass education does not necessarily lead to a drop in quality but it certainly leads to necessary reconsideration of what quality means. The task for quality assurance is to develop both theory and practical procedures that fit different notions of desirable quality in higher education.

Standards

There were concerns that massification leads to a decline in 'standards'. Although rarely defined, the implication was that 'standards' refers to the outcomes or the level of intellectual ability of students. There seemed to be little discussion about massification impacting on standards of research.

There was little support for the notion that standards in higher education were declining. There was much more support for the idea that higher education has changed and that current and past standards cannot be compared. Things are different but standards are not worse. Some delegates argued that evidence in their country suggested that standards are improving. To some extent, this view is predicated upon a value-added notion. At one level, the standard of education in a country has increased, irrespective of whether the standard of achievement of all graduates matches that of the élite graduates of the past. Second, the value added by the system is greater as students are from a much wider variety of backgrounds. Third, the kinds of skills and abilities being developed within higher education are different from the past. Fourth, students have different cognitive processes and work differently, especially with interactive media, than did students in the past.

However, although it may not be sensible to talk of falling standards, they have changed, or in some circumstances, need to change. By retaining 'élite' standards, which focus almost exclusively on ability to engage with a subject, often assessed through traditional methods such as examinations, there is a risk of rising failure rates. Standards now involve skills and a wider set of abilities.

Similarly, mass education tends to lead to changed (lowered) entrance requirements for students. In Ireland and elsewhere, lowered entrance standards have often led to increased student attrition, whether that is because institutions are still judging students by élite standards or whether students decide that higher education is not for them. The problem, though, is that quality-assurance bodies are now taking a keen interest in attrition rates.

This situation may be exacerbated by financial pressures on higher education institutions to maintain fee income by retaining its students. This retention pressure might result in

leniency in assessment of students' academic achievement in the early years of a programme of study. However, this creates a serious issue in the final year. Are students failed and the institution thus runs the risk of being seen as a failing institution, or are students passed and standards put at risk?

Standards need to be reassessed in the light of changing circumstances, such as shorter half-life of knowledge, impact of information technology, funding reductions, not just massification. Thus, there is a new era in higher education, which needs new methods of evaluating standards that, for example, provide for continuous assessment and allow for assessment of skill development. Some ways of assessing individual added-value would be useful.

However, massification could lead to a 'qualification drift'. Will 'real' higher education come to be the postgraduate qualifications, such as MA or MSc. The evidence in the UK to date is that this is not the case, unless a Masters degree is linked to professional development or accreditation. This is different in other countries, where, for example, the standard outcome of an undergraduate education is a Masters qualification or equivalent. The Bologna Declaration, in Europe, is addressing this issue.

Quality as Agent for Change

There was a distinction between quality monitoring (external and internal-external) as an agent of change within institutions and as a vehicle for government policy implementation.

Internally, quality processes have some impact (see Theme 1). One element of this is the higher profile given to teaching ability. Teaching ability is now *expected* of academics and staff development, to enhance teaching ability, is more prevalent. 'Academic freedom is not the freedom to teach badly.' At the same time, students must *expect* (and be able) to accept responsibility for their own learning, which is *not* a passive activity. Ironically, while teaching is gaining a higher profile, the teaching paradigm is being questioned.

Quality processes, it was argued, should and to some extent do serve as a means to change curricula and priorities in response to changing (external) environment. The development of key skills and outcome-orientation are cases in point (see Theme 2). Overall, there was some agreement that external quality monitoring has been used as a vehicle for the implementation of policy, although this has often been subverted. In many respects, delegates had no problem with many aspects of change linked to EQM, but the major disadvantage was the way it legitimated declining resources.

In an era of mass higher education, an approach to quality that grasped the transformative element and added value of the student experience was considered most important. The follow-up seminar, in Melbourne, in October 2002, takes up the theme of *Transformative Quality*.