Challenges of quality assurance: lessons from the UK experience

The purpose of this paper is to identify the major challenges in developing a quality assurance process within the European Higher Education Area.[1] The paper will draw on the complex history of the development of quality assurance in the UK but will not attempt to provide a detailed account of the development. The UK experience will provide insights into how to address the key issues at the heart of the development of quality assurance of higher education. This paper will focus on the quality of learning rather than research.

When discussing the challenges of quality assurance in higher education, four core issues arise. First, the relationship between quality, standards and quality standards and the their relationship to the broad swathe of approaches that fall under the general heading of 'quality assurance'. Second, the purposes of quality assurance; different purposes require different approaches. Third, exploring the link between quality assurance and innovation in pedagogic practice. Fourth, developing a holistic approach that encompasses key Bologna action lines.

Quality and quality assurance

The first and second of these core principles has been examined in detail in earlier papers (Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey 1995, 2004, 2006) and the following is a very brief résumé. One should distinguish 'quality' from 'standards' and both of them from 'quality standards'.

Quality

Quality is, in essence, about the processes within higher education, the way, for example that students learn. Five definitions of quality have been identified. First, a traditional concept of quality as 'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Second, quality as consistency, summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time. Third, quality as fitness for purpose, which judges the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. (Some commentators suggest that 'fitness of purpose' is a definition of quality but it is a specification of parameters of fitness and not itself a definition of the quality concept.) Fourth, quality as value-for-money. Fifth quality as transformation, which sees quality as a process of change, as adding value to students through a learning experience that both enhances and empowers them. In this definition, education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant.

Standards

'Standards' refers, in essence, to outcomes. Four types of standards have been identified. First, academic standards that demonstrate ability to meet a specified level of academic attainment. Second, standards of competence that demonstrate a specified level of ability on a range of competencies. Third, service standards that are indicators of the extent to which institutions provide an appropriate level of

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support for the learner? Fourth, organisational standards that specify the appropriateness and effectiveness of organisational processes and practices.

The five quality definitions and the four standards concepts result in a two-dimensional process-output grid with twenty cells.

Quality standards

'Quality' and 'standards' are concepts that differ from 'quality standards', which are norms or guiding principles, as in the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) (ENQA 2005). The analogy would be a golf score. The way the player tackles the course would be the quality of the play, the number of strokes the player takes would be the standard and the par score for the course (the number of strokes a good player is expected to take) would be the quality standard.

Quality assurance purposes

The four purposes for quality assurance are accountability, control, compliance and improvement (Harvey 2006; 2007). *Accountability* is about institutions taking responsibility for the service they provide and the public money they spend. *Control* is about ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, in particular making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of criteria of adequacy. *Compliance* is ensuring that institutions adopt procedures, practices and policies that are considered by funders and governments to be desirable for the proper conduct of the sector and to ensure its quality. The *improvement* purpose, sometimes also referred to as enhancement, is less about constraint and more about the encouragement of adjustment and change. Most systems of external review claim to encourage improvement, however it has been a secondary feature of most systems, especially at the initial stage. As systems move into second or third phases, the improvement element has been given more attention. (Sweden and Finland have been unusual in starting with improvement).

Different purposes mean that quality assurance will vary in its approaches, object, focus and methods (Diagram 1). (Space precludes any detailed discussion of these diverse approaches but see, for example, Harvey (2004, 2008)).

Purpose	accountability	control	compliance	improvement	
Approach	accreditation	audit	assessment	standards checking	
Object	provider/HEI	programme	learner	output	
Focus	govern-anace & regulation	curriculum design	learning experience	medium of delivery	student support
	content of program-mes	financial viability & processes	qualifi-cation	admin support	organis-ational processes
Methods	self-assessment	PIs	peer review	inspection	
	document analysis	stakeholder surveys	direct intervention	proxy delegate	

Adapted from Harvey, 2004
Figure 1: Facets of external quality assurance

Quality assurance, pedagogic practice and Bologna lines

The third and fourth core issues, relationship to pedagogic practice and to the Bologna process, will be examined in more depth and they both relate to the development of quality culture, a concept increasingly widely used but rarely explicitly developed. Again space precludes a detailed analysis of quality culture and it will be touched on briefly as part of the holistic process (see EUA 2006; Harvey and Stensaker, 2008, for more details).

Relating quality assurance to pedagogic practice involves examining a number of relationships. First, is the purpose of quality assurance to improve teaching and learning? Second, if so, does it draw on or closely relate to innovation in learning and teaching? Is there, for example, an underlying philosophy that emphasises student-centred learning? Third, is the link between quality improvement (enhancement) and the student learning experience grounded in a holistic approach to quality and learning.

The challenges and the UK experience

Holistic approach

The single most important challenge for quality assurance is the development of a holistic approach that integrates quality assurance with the enhancement of learning.

If the bottom line is the improvement or enhancement of provision and outcomes, then it is also important to see quality improvement as a holistic endeavour. Fragmenting elements of quality assurance, or approaching it by pre-determining methods in advance of a clear understanding of purpose, as was the case in the early years of European developments, inhibits rather than enables improvement.
In this respect, the UK probably now has the most sophisticated and inclusive approach to quality of any country. What has emerged from nearly two decades of quality assurance in the UK is an 'academic infrastructure' aligned with quality processes that are, in the main, intended to enhance learning.

This has not always been the case and the history of quality assurance in the UK has been turbulent, complex, at times divisive and frequently burdensome. There is no space to explore all the facets and nuances of quality assurance in the UK, not least because England, Wales and Scotland have all developed along distinct lines.

The following is a very brief, simplified, outline of the key approaches that occurred over time and between nations. Quality assurance in the UK goes back way beyond the 'quality revolution' of the early 1990s. Professional accreditation (of programmes) is long established in some disciplines, such as medicine, and is, in some cases, encapsulated in regulatory legislation. In addition, the external examiner scheme has been in place since the university system in the UK began to expand more than a hundred years ago with the creation, at that time, of the new civic universities. Since 1990, the UK has experienced various forms of quality audits and quality assessment. Audits focused on institutional processes and assessments explored the quality of individual programmes or groups of programmes in the same subject area. There was also a recurrent research assessment exercise linked to research funding.

In 1991, the universities acted jointly to set up the Academic Audit Unit to undertake academic quality audits of institutions. The audits examined organisational processes and made recommendations but made no overall judgement and was not linked to any kind of accreditation. UK universities are autonomous institutions with a charter. This initial approach was an attempt by the universities to head off external procedures out with their control. The first round of Academic audits continued until 1997, under the auspices of the Higher Education Quality Council, which replaced the Unit. Meanwhile, the politicians wanted a much more inspectorial approach and from 1993 to 2001 almost all subjects in all publicly-funded higher education institutions were reviewed separately, initially by the Higher Education Funding Council for each country through a process of 'Teaching Quality Assessments' (TQA). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was formed in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education. It picked up and adjusted the TQA process, developing Subject Reviews and Academic Reviews, which provided a rating for programmes and identified weaknesses. Very few programmes were terminated as a result of this process and it was an enormous bureaucratic exercise that tended to alienate staff. To add to this subject review process, a second round of audits (known as continuation audit) was carried out by QAA between 1998 and 2002.

There was a significant amount of friction and distrust in the sector for more than a decade. Much of the work undertaken, while having a long-term influence on aspects of quality in the UK, also engendered resentment, bitterness, scathing attacks and ridicule. Quality assurance (or just 'Quality') became a byword for heavy-handed, government-influenced bureaucracy. It was seen as unnecessarily intrusive, as a

vehicle to bolster managerialism, reduce collegialism, as a means to destroy institutional autonomy, and even academic freedom as the external quality processes had far too many layers, and didn't necessarily gel with internal quality processes, which had been heavily reliant on a well-respected if creaking external examiner system. For some, the quality edifice was seen as a means to cover up reduced funding per student, and as being a waste of money in its own right because far too much was spent uncovering the very few poor courses.

Recently, with a more enlightened leadership of the QAA, mutual trust between the agency and the institutions is being re-established. The current approach adopted by QAA is set out on their web site on the 'Introduction' page (QAA, 2008). The following is a précis.

The QAA approach to assurance is very closely aligned to the ESG and, reflecting that, maintains that each university and college of higher education is responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are being achieved and a good quality education is being offered. QAA's role is to safeguard the public interest in the standards of higher education qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. They do this by using peers to review quality and standards.

In England and Northern Ireland higher education institutions are reviewed through institutional audit, which aims to ensure that institutions are providing higher education, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard. Further education colleges that provide higher education programmes are reviewed through an academic review at subject level, which looks at subject areas against the broad aims of the subject provider. Judgements are made about the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities for students. A similar but slightly varied approach applies in Wales.

Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) has been developed in Scotland to manage quality and standards. ELIR focuses on the deliberate steps taken by each higher education institution to continually improve the learning experience of students.

Among other things, QAA also audit collaborative arrangements between UK universities and colleges of higher education and organisations overseas that lead to the award of degrees from UK universities and colleges of higher education.

QAA also provide reference points that help to define clear and explicit standards. The agency has worked with the higher education sector and other stakeholders in the development of the academic infrastructure, which consists of five elements. First, subject benchmark statements set out expectations about the standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. Second, programme specifications are the sets of information that each institution provides about its programmes. Third, frameworks for higher education qualifications, the aim of which is to promote a clearer understanding of the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles, such as bachelor's degree or master's degree. There are two frameworks: one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and one for Scotland, which is part of a wider Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Fourth a Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, which is a guideline on good practice for universities and colleges, relating to the

management of academic standards and quality. The Code of practice has 10 sections:

- postgraduate research programmes;
- collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning);
- students with disabilities;
- external examining;
- academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters;
- assessment of students;
- programme approval, monitoring and review;
- career education, information and guidance;
- placement learning;
- recruitment and admissions.

Fifth, progress files, which help to make the outcomes, or results, of learning in higher education more explicit and more valuable. They include three elements: the transcript of achievement; personal and development planning; and the students' own personal development records.

What is unique about this approach is the way the elements interlock to link evaluative processes, with curriculum design, assessment régimes, award frameworks and articulation of student achievement. As noted in a recent paper:

> This infrastructure approach is, at heart, an attempt to embed a culture of quality designed to develop a student-centred approach and to continuously improve. It also attempts to provide the context in which internal processes are in a symbiotic relationship with external processes. In that respect it has been relatively successful as many of the infrastructure elements have now become taken-for-granted, even if they were initially compliance responses to perceived bureaucratic requirements. (Harvey, 2008)

Aligning internal and external quality assurance

A second key challenge is aligning internal and external quality assurance processes. This is not just a matter of avoiding conflicting processes or duplication. In some cases internal and external processes will have different aims and, where this is the case, these differences need to be made transparent so that there is no confusion or resentment at having to comply with different requirements.

However, the alignment of internal and external processes also needs to be more than requiring compliance to complementary procedures. It needs to ensure that quality assurance processes gel with everyday work and that they engage academics, managers and students in a positive way that encourages reflection on improvement.

Linking to learning and the role of learning outcomes

This leads to the third key challenge, linking quality monitoring to learning. There should be a clear philosophy of pedagogy, based on research, that underlies a process of quality improvement. The Bologna process, with its focus on learning outcomes, is clearly projecting a shift from teacher-led instruction to student-centred learning.

Learning outcomes have been an intrinsic part of the development of the Bologna

process for a decade. The development of learning outcomes is seen as pivotal in the shift from didactic, teacher-led approaches to pedagogy to a student-centred approach to learning. *Trends V* notes:

> Although new degree structures are still commonly perceived as the main Bologna goal, there is increasing awareness that the most significant legacy of the process will be a change of educational paradigm across the continent. Institutions are slowly moving away from a system of teacher-driven provision, and towards a student-centred concept of higher education. Thus the reforms are laying the foundations for a system adapted to respond to a growing variety of student needs. Institutions and their staff are still at the early stages of realising the potential of reforms for these purposes. Understanding and integrating the use of a learning outcomes based approach remains a key medium-term challenge. When achieved, it will enable students to become the engaged subjects of their own learning process, and also contribute to improving many issues of progression between cycles, institutions, sectors, the labour market and countries. (Crozier *et al*. 2007, p. 8)

However, Crozier *et al*. (2007, p. 47) remarked on the slow pace of change and noted that the 'tools developed to assist the Bologna process…are not always being exploited to their full potential' and that it is particularly 'important for staff and students to think in terms of learning outcomes to ensure that curricula are re-considered in appropriate depth'.

There are many Bologna papers, seminars and conference reports related to learning outcomes. The latest major event was the Edinburgh Bologna Seminar on Learning Outcomes, in February 2008. It

> endorsed the proposition that "learning outcomes are the basic building blocks of the Bologna package of educational reforms" and that this methodological approach is at the heart of the paradigm shift from teacher to student-centred learning. (Roberts, 2008. p. 1)

The review of the event also noted the danger of a superficial compliance approach to implementing learning outcomes. Learning outcomes involve a fundamental, complex and multi-faceted change in approach and it is not just a cosmetic exercise. This needs time to develop if it is to result in a better learning experience and it also needs to reflect 'local priorities, diverse needs and national traditions of the Bologna countries'. The review concludes that a high priority should be placed on training in 'the writing and implementation of learning outcomes' (Roberts, 2008. p. 2).

The Edinburgh event placed a premium on processes, across Europe, to assist staff and students to co-operate in the systematic implementation of learning outcomes at institutional, programme and module level. It asserted the need for constructive alignment of learning outcomes with learning, teaching and assessment. The seminar also recommended that, to facilitate recognition and mobility, learning outcomes should be written at 'threshold' rather than 'average' or 'modal' level. It was suggested that a special programme should be created 'to promote trans-national staff and student mobility to share good practice in the development and implementation of learning outcomes', thus reasserting one of the original objectives of the Bologna process.

Both *Trends V* and the Edinburgh event, noted that a learning outcomes approach does not sell itself to sceptics:

It is particularly important for institutions to work closely with employers, and their representative organisations, to spread knowledge of the new degree structures and their learning outcomes in different academic disciplines. There is otherwise a danger that the new degrees, particularly at the first cycle, will be misunderstood or mistrusted within the labour market. (Crozier *et al*. 2007, p. 78)

The recommendation from the seminar was for a longitudinal study to collect evidence from graduates and employers about the impact and effectiveness of a learning-outcomes approach.

A learning-outcomes approach emphasises three things:
1. The learning rather than the time spent learning;
2. Learning rather than teaching;
3. The array of knowledge, skills and attitudes (attributes) that are the constituents of learning.

In the UK, the learning outcomes approach is well established and has been championed for some considerable time by pedagogic innovators. In the main, this development was outside the province of quality assurance and only became aligned with the formalisation of the academic infrastructure.

Mobility, credit accumulation and transfer

A key feature of the Bologna process is mobility. Although often seen as the mobility of students and staff, the economic imperatives driving the Bologna process are ultimately concerned with the mobility of labour. A system of recognition of qualifications is thus vital, hence the concern with a two-cycle qualification structure in the 1999 Declaration, now extended to the tripartite Bachelors/Masters/Doctorate. Credit accumulation and transfer is another aspect of mobility and it has quality implications. Developing a workable credit accumulation and transfer system is the fourth key challenge for quality assurance.

Credit accumulation is a relatively unproblematic process within institutions as most have procedures for internal transfer of students. However, once students move outside the institution, transfer of credit and its accumulation towards a degree becomes problematic. This continues to be difficult within jurisdictions, even where national/regional systems or norms of credit accumulation and transfer exist; it is far more difficult and complex when transfer is across borders.

The Sorbonne declaration of 25th of May 1998 emphasised the creation of the European area of higher education as a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability and the Continent's overall development. The Bologna Declaration (JDEME, 1999) developed this by, *inter alia*, calling for the 'establishment of a system of credits—such as in the ECTS system—as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility'. The Declaration called for:
> …Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to:
> - for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services
> - for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights….

In the recent London Communiqué, facilitating mobility was reaffirmed as one of the main goals to be achieved with the creation of a European Higher Education Area:

> Mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process, creating opportunities for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension. (London Communiqué, 2007)

However, Ministers acknowledged that a lot of obstacles still existed and reaffirmed their willingness to work for decisive progress in overcoming them. The main challenges identified related to:

- visas, residence and work permits;
- financial incentives (including portable student loans and grants);
- pension arrangements;
- joint programmes and flexible curricula.
- recognition of qualifications.

The first three are to do with the logistics of mobility rather than any quality issues *per se*. The issue of joint programmes is a complicated one and in a nascent state and this paper will not address that.

Recognition of qualifications has quality implications and is a multi-faceted issue that will be outlined below; it refers to recognition of complete qualifications for labour market purposes as well as for movement within higher education (for example, from bachelor to master's courses or to doctoral programmes) and recognition of work completed towards a qualification for movement from institution to institution while undertaking a degree.

In the UK there was a system of credits (CATS) that predates engagement in the Bologna Process and considerable effort went into creating a transfer system. In practice, students did not take advantage of the flexibility and move between institutions within the country as much as was anticipated. This may, however, have been because the system never worked smoothly. Institutions, despite acknowledging the credit value of student work from other institutions would still argue that the course content was not equivalent and hence not transferable. Further, institutions would not accept credits that added up to more than 50% of the programme, arguing that they would be awarding a qualification that was substantially not their own. In some cases the acceptable proportion for transfer was no more than 33%.

When the Bologna process took off and there was increased mobility across Europe (although, again, less than some anticipated), the ECTS system was also regarded as flawed, with much the same intra-nation issues operating internationally. The issue is, as the following extract from the Bologna official website reveals, the delegation to the local (institutional) level of the decision-making process.

> The purpose of recognition is to make it possible for learners to use their qualifications from one education system in another education system (or country) without losing the real value of those qualifications.
> The main international legal text that aims to further the fair recognition of qualifications is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention).

Like any legal text, the Convention must be put into practice. The recognition of qualifications falls within the competence of each country. In most cases, this means that higher education institutions are responsible for the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of further study whereas professional bodies or employers are responsible for recognition for the purposes of the labour market.

Tools that facilitate the recognition of qualifications are the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement (DS) (Bologna Process, 2008a)

The *Trends V* report on credit transfer within the EHEA comments:

The use of ECTS as both a credit accumulation and credit transfer system continues to become more widespread across Europe, with almost 75% of institutions reporting use of ECTS as a transfer system [up from 68% in 2003] and over 66% as an accumulation system [up from 50% in 2003]. Yet while a vast majority of institutions are now using ECTS, there remains much work to be done to ensure that they use it correctly. Incorrect or superficial use of ECTS is currently still widespread. Such usage hinders the re-structuring of curricula, and the development of flexible learning paths for students, while also making both mobility and recognition more difficult. Institutions have to take responsibility for driving the development of ECTS in a way which enables them to respond effectively to the challenges of an open and truly European higher education area. (Crosier *et al*., 2007, p. 8)

Some countries, such as the UK, Spain, Cyprus and Latvia, use their own credit accumulation system and Greece and Russia have a majority of institutions reporting that no credit accumulation system is in place. Crosier *et al.* (2007, p. 36) are concerned that something at the heart of the reform process has these inconsistencies and that 'The extent and quality of the use of ECTS has thus become a matter of key importance to Europe's higher education institutions and students'.

ECTS is not seen as an independent issue to be resolved but as an element in an integrated approach to curriculum reform and recognition of learning outcomes along with the Diploma Supplement and Qualifications Framework. Space precludes detailed discussion of these elements but the crucial point is that credit transfer is linked to learning outcomes and the specification of such outcomes and their appropriate locus within a framework of qualifications.

Although mobility is a key aim of the Bologna process in Europe, credit transfer continues to be rather slow in emerging as a seamless process. In essence, mutual recognition of quality, underpins credit transfer. Mutual recognition often involves bipartisan agreements and this is both inefficient and complex, resulting ultimately in information overload for prospective students. Further, while mutual recognition may be a necessary condition for transfer, it appears to be far from a sufficient condition to enable the transfer process.

The more that institutions adopt a 'not-invented-here' approach, and require that every transfer is from a programme with equivalent content then the process of transfer becomes tortuous. Focusing on learning outcomes makes this approach easier, as does a universal system that weights the contribution of courses to a final award (an ECTS equivalent). A qualifications framework, in principle, facilitates the process further, although such frameworks are very difficult to create across borders and have the risk of being over-deterministic. In the last resort, a process of quality

assurance that encourages mutual trust and acceptance between institutions within and across jurisdictions is necessary to underpin any transfer arrangements. (See Blackmur, 2004 for a scathing critique of qualifications frameworks.)

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the key challenge for higher education quality assurance is to develop a holistic approach that aligns pedagogic development with quality assurance processes in a way that not only engages all stakeholders, improves learning but also ensures a fully integrated approach that, *inter alia*, aligns internal and external processes, encourages a culture of innovation, student-centred learning and the transferability of that learning.

Changes of culture take a long time. As Stephen Adam pointed out in his introduction to the Bologna Process seminar on recognition in Riga, 2007 (Crozier *et al*., 2007, p. 60):

> When developments in qualifications frameworks, cycles, learning outcomes, quality assurance, credits, recognition and lifelong learning are put together something new and powerful will be created. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will provide immense opportunities for countries and institutions providing they fully embrace the changes inherent within the new architecture for higher education that is emerging... However, it must be remembered that for most countries the difficult task of producing and implementing qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes is just commencing.

'Quality culture' is a new 'buzzword' in Europe. The European Universities Association (EUA, 2004) sponsored a project that ran from 2002–2006. It was a spin-off from the Bologna-process designed to increase awareness of the need to develop an internal quality culture and promote the introduction of *internal* quality management to improve quality levels and help universities to make the most of external quality assurance processes.

A key to the whole integrated approach is ensuring that there are internal processes under local control and with delegated responsibility and accountability and that they are fully integrated with external processes into an infrastructure. This is explicit in the UK and increasingly materialising within the Bologna Process as its action-lines overlap. At heart, a holistic, improvement approach requires the establishment and maintenance of trust between the academy and the quality assurance bodies.

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