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Editorial

Impact of External Quality Monitoring

The first issue of the next volume (3:1) of *Quality in Higher Education* will be a special issue devoted to exploring the impact of external quality monitoring on the procedures, practices and outcomes of higher education institutions. External quality monitoring includes any external activity that impinges on, assesses, audits or evaluates either internal quality procedures or the quality of provision or output from an institution of higher education, including (Harvey & Knight, 1996):

- External quality audit of internal quality assurance procedures, such as the academic audits of institutions undertaken by the Quality Audit Division of the Higher Education Quality Council in the UK.
- External evaluation of institutional status, such as the assessment undertaken by the Consejo Nacional de Universidades in Venezuela, which evaluates and grants licences to new, experimental higher education institutions and continues to evaluate them until they attain full autonomy.
- External assessment of institutional provision, such as that undertaken by the Comité National d'Évaluation (CNE) in France, which evaluates each institution holistically.
- External evaluations of teaching and learning provision at a programme or subject level, such as the evaluations undertaken by the independent Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education in Denmark.
- Accreditation of courses or institutions as used, for example, in North America in which non-governmental voluntary associations recognise institutions or programmes that have been found to meet stated criteria of quality.
- Accreditation and validation of programmes of study, such as those undertaken in some countries by professional and regulatory bodies.
- Evaluation and appraisal of research, such as the Research Assessment Exercise conducted by the Funding Councils in the UK and the research evaluations undertaken by the Academy of Finland since the early 1980s.
- Evaluations of community interaction and impact on the local economy, such as the element included in the third round of the Australian quality assessment programme.
- External examination of students, such as the use of external examiners to monitor standards on undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the UK, Denmark, Ireland and several Commonwealth countries as well as in the technikons in South Africa.

The issue includes accounts by people well-placed in institutions in a variety of countries to assess the impact of such external quality monitoring on internal quality procedures, curricula, innovations in teaching and learning, the knowledge skills and abilities of students, research output, staff morale and so on. Further papers, exploring the relationship between external quality monitoring and internal practices and procedures would be most welcome.

From Accountability to Improvement

As more attention is being paid to the impact of external procedures beyond that of placing quality on the agenda of higher education institutions, so there is a marked drift away from quality as an accountability instrument to the development of a process of continuous quality improvement. This drift is evident in recent conferences and seminars including those in Paris, Bloemfontein, Stoke-on-Trent and London [1]. The initial benefits that arise from an accountability-led approach that forces institutions to face up to quality issues, have a very limited life-span. While such a process may lead to an initial upsurge in quality-related activity, such as the implementation or documenting of procedures, it is unlikely to lead to ongoing quality improvement.

Commentators in many countries are suggesting that it is time to switch from account-ability models of external quality monitoring (EQM) to approaches that place a primary focus on improvement. To be effective a quality improvement process must be both continuous and be driven by the people who can effect real change—in the case of teaching and learning that means the teachers, students and learning support staff.

What might a bottom-up audit of continuous quality improvement look like? Research and anecdote from around the world illustrates that the most significant element of existing EQM methodologies is self-assessment, which promotes a process of open, responsive collegial reflection on purpose, procedures and practice. Self-assessment, unlike peer review or performance indicators, offers the basis for a bottom-up process of continuous quality improvement (CQI) combined with top-down internal and external audit.

The key to a new approach is to identify meaningful teams operating at the learner-teacher interface. Each team (for example a group of staff teaching a 'course' along with student representatives) would set a quality improvement agenda. Rather than the typical course annual report—a retrospective account, written by a tired course director at the end of an academic year that gets filed away and forgotten until the next report has to be written—the CQI agenda would be a team-written document at the start of the year identifying not what had happened but what improvements will be made in the forth-coming twelve months. Each year the effectiveness of last year's improvements strategy would be evaluated and a new twelve-month strategy initiated.

The suggested approach would subject each team-based CQI agenda to a 360 degree review by the appropriate dean or head of services, by students and by other teams within the same faculty (Fig. 1). This process of 360 degree review would lead not only to the projection of sensible and manageable strategies for improvement but also act as a check on the veracity of improvement claims.

A central internal quality monitoring (IQM) unit collates the reports (including, if appropriate, one from the deans and heads of services acting as a middle-management team, subject to a similar 360 degree review). Where there may be concern about the veracity of any report, they should undertake an audit using whatever procedure is appropriate to confirm the content. The unit may also wish to undertake periodic or random audits. A university-wide overview and improvement strategy (including long-term plans), produced by a senior management team including the Vice-Chancellor, would be added to the team reports and the composite document would constitute the university quality report.

Removing any 'threat' associated with self-assessment is also necessary if CQI agendas are to be honest, meaningful and achievable. Instead of a threat, the self-assessment should be seen as an opportunity. Self-assessments should not in any direct way be linked with
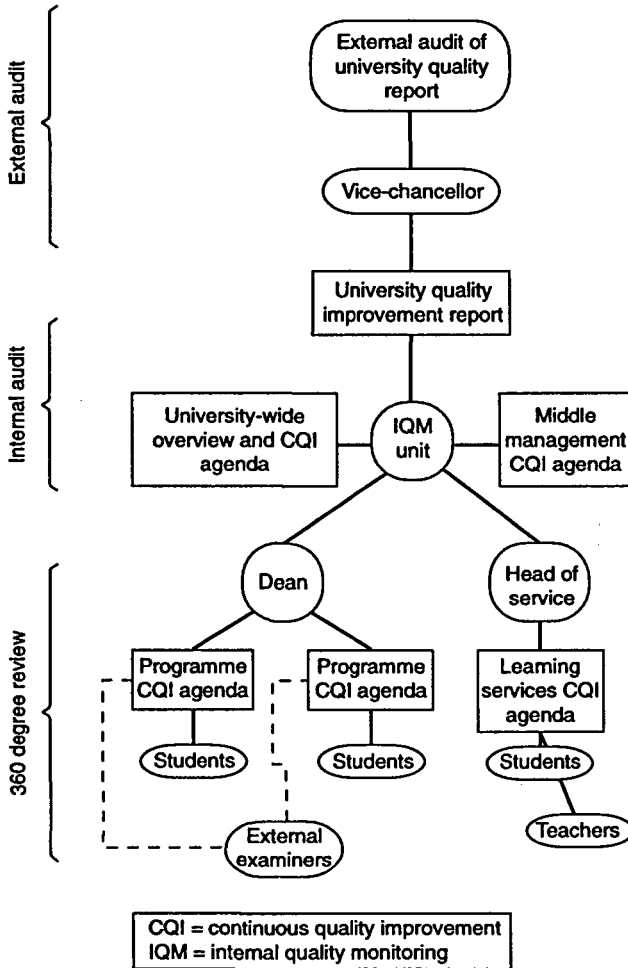
FIG. 1. Suggested improvement audit structure. (CQI = continuous quality improvement; IQM = internal quality management.)

the distribution of resources, potential termination of courses or contracts, or performance-related pay.

The 'Quality Report' would be the sum total of the quality documentation produced by the institution on an annual basis. EQM would then involve an audit of this quality report in much the same way that the financial accounts are audited. This may occur on an annual, periodic or random basis. Such audits may include inspections, peer review, reference to documentation or statistical indicators as appropriate but would focus entirely on improvement agendas and would comment on the veracity of claims, the appropriateness of the strategy and highlight good practice. The institution quality report and the audit report would be published documents.

This process is simple, emphasises continuous improvement, places the onus on those who can affect change, and gives them ownership and control while engendering a responsive and responsible approach.

A bottom-up approach to quality improvement requires identifiable teams of academics,

support staff and managers working together to identify quality-improvement targets, setting agendas for action and reporting clearly on intentions and outcomes.

In a CQI process institutional management does not direct or manage quality but provides a context to facilitate quality improvement, in particular, the dissemination of good practice and the delegation of responsibility for quality. Management has seven strategic functions in respect of continuous quality improvement:

• setting the parameters within which the quality improvement process takes place;
• establishing a non-exploitative, suspicion-free context in which a culture of quality improvement can flourish;
• establishing and ensuring a process of internal quality monitoring;
• enabling the consistent gathering of relevant evidence to inform analysis and reflection;
• disseminating good practice through an effective and open system of communication;
• encouraging and facilitating team-working amongst academic and academic-related colleagues;
• delegating responsibility for quality improvement to the units that are going to deliver continuous improvement at the staff–student interface.

Team working is essential for the process to work effectively. What the suggested system does is to revive collegialism—not a retreat to cloisterism but a new collegialism that is outward-looking, responsive and responsible (Harvey, 1994b). Effective functioning for quality-improvement will require that the teams consist of people with a common focus and responsibilities who are able to act as coherent working groups. Team decisions should involve everyone and not be made by managers or team leaders. It is imperative that the team operates as a unit and that decisions are team decisions and not imposed by a team leader or by an external senior manager.

This approach means that the team must accept responsibility for continuous quality improvement within its domain. This involves a number of specific team responsibilities including:

• identification of its *area of operation* and the specific aspects of quality that the team will monitor;
• specification of appropriate mechanisms for *assessing and maintaining standards* and procedures for action in the case of inappropriate standards;
• identification and implementation of *procedures for monitoring quality*, such as obtaining student feedback about their learning experience. All such procedures must be made explicit and transparent;
• identification of *procedures for improving quality*, such as review and updating of curriculum content and design, staff development and training, staff–student seminars, and so on. In many circumstances, procedures will already exist that can be adopted or easily adapted to fit the proposed approach;
• ensuring that its procedures and improvements are set in the context of a *local, self-critical review and strategic plan*. Such a plan will be constrained by the parameters of institutional strategic planning but, within that, should identify longer-term goals and, more importantly, one-year, attainable, quality improvements (Harvey, 1994a).

Accountability approaches have been successful in initiating a quality culture. It is now time for a quantum leap into a new improvement-led approach that will be sustainable in the diverse and radically different system of higher education in the 21st century.

In this issue, Lewis Elton reports on a forward-looking evaluation of the Welsh system of quality assessment, which clearly emphasises local responsibility for quality improve-

ment. External agencies should change from stressing accountability for past performance (through direct assessment) to checking that self-evaluation for improvement is effective. In such a developmental system, based on mutual trust, power is shared between the external agency and the institution.

Robert Lundquist approaches the issue of continuous quality improvement through the evaluation of the Swedish Quality Award. He argues that a quality award could provide an effective way to encourage further quality improvements.

Trudi Banta, Karen Black and Jane Lambert provide some examples from the US of the assessment and encouragement of student development outside the classroom. They argue that, rather surprisingly, assessment of the whole student development is only just coming to be recognised as an important component of gauging effectiveness of higher education institutions.

Schubert Foo and Geok See Ng provide details of a small-scale study of student approaches to learning. They consider how students from two different types of educational backgrounds respond to modest innovations in teaching and learning in an otherwise traditional, teacher-led, educational system.

Uduak Udom highlights the major features of accreditation in Nigeria, a country in which there is considerable central direction to higher education. The paper also raises issues of academic autonomy and publication of assessment outcomes.

Paul Gibbs raises the philosophical issue of the intrusion of the market into purpose and practice of higher education. He draws on Aristotelian philosophy, Heideggerian hermeneutics and post-modern thinkers to ask whether the essence of being, the development of the self, is being undermined by market orientations. He urges a moral re-evaluation of higher education provision.

Our Forum contribution takes issue with Graham Gibbs's article (Issue 2:1) on the relationship between teaching and research. R.J. Johnston argues that Gibbs' analysis lacked rigour and leads to a polarised view of teaching and research rather than seeing them as complementary activities, which will only harden divisions rather than lead to reasoned debate.

Note

[1] OECD Conference 'Institutional Responses to Quality Assessment' 4–6 December 1995, Paris, France; the Quality Assurance Conference, 'Quality and Quality Assurance: Ideals versus Realities and the Way Forward in South African Higher Education', University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa, 19–20 March 1996; 'The Dilemmas of Mass Higher Education'; an International Conference at Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, England, 10–12 April 1996; CVCP/SRHE Seminar, 'Transforming Higher Education', SOAS, University of London, 30 April 1996.

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