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QUALITY IS NOT FREE! QUALITY MONITORING ALONE WILL NOT IMPROVE QUALITY

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Introduction

Quality in higher education is *not* free. On the contrary, maintaining, monitoring and improving quality is expensive. 'Quality' in higher education does not stand still. Just to maintain the quality of teaching requires constant scholarship. Improvements in the quality of knowledge produced and in the quality of teaching and learning provided both require research. Scholarship and research do not come cheap. Monitoring quality, checking the 'level' of quality, or exploring whether quality assurance processes are working effectively are also expensive operations, taking time and resources.

Crosby's (1979) suggestion that quality is free *may* work in the manufacturing sector, although considerable doubts have been raised, but it does not apply in higher education. Crosby's view is based upon the idea that delegated responsibility for quality at every stage of the production process results in higher quality, more consistent, products. The reduction in wastage as a result of defective products far outweighs the costs of a system based on a chain of customer-supplier interfaces rather than reliance on a final quality control department. Higher education is not producing a 'consistent product' be it research output or graduating students.

External quality monitoring (by which I mean any process designed to assess, evaluate or assure quality) does not of itself improve quality, let alone at zero real cost. External quality monitoring costs a lot of money (albeit a small proportion of national higher education budgets. The costs of improvement associated with EQM go way beyond the cost of the monitoring body. There is the additional cost of preparing for quality monitoring visits, of taking part in peer reviews, and so on. But the real cost of improvement is not that associated with monitoring, but of expending effort and energy to develop knowledge and learning. These are the core activities of universities and, thus, in one sense they are not a cost because it is essentially what universities are funded to do. However, if funding is reduced it makes it more difficult to sustain the level of research and of effective teaching and learning procedures. Innovation, invention, risk-taking become more difficult. The *maintenance* of quality becomes problematic, let alone *improvement* of quality.

So external quality monitoring does not provide us with a cheap way to enhance quality. The question I want to address is does it provide enhancement at all?

'Quality is good!'. Not so many years ago there would have been no argument about this from anyone associated with higher education. Indeed, it would have been almost absurd to suggest otherwise. Implicitly, if not explicitly, higher education institutions saw themselves (and were seen by others) as intrinsically quality institutions. Of course quality was good — it was almost a meaningless statement in the context of higher education.

But today, there are many people working in higher education, as teachers, researchers and managers who are not so sure. Indeed, I have heard people in Britain, Sweden, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia suggesting that, to the contrary, 'quality is bad!'.

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What has happened? How can a fundamental, taken-for-granted presupposition about higher education be cast in such a negative light?

The world of higher education is changing rapidly in an attempt to catch up with a rapidly changing world. 'Quality issues' represent the surface of this complexity and 'quality' has moved from a taken-for-granted axiom to *scapegoat* for the upheaval in higher education.

Changing definition of quality

One explanation for the change in perception is that the definition of quality has changed from an academically acceptable notion, based on excellence, to an academically unacceptable, externally-imposed, definition based on value for money.

Traditionally, quality, in higher education was seen in terms of the 'exceptional'. By its very nature, élitist higher education recruited exceptional teachers, researchers and students and provided them with exceptional libraries, laboratories and opportunities to learn from one another. 'Excellence' was the clarion call of all universities. The emphasis was on high quality inputs. The result was 'excellent' outcomes: pioneering research; scholarly theses, and exceptional graduates who were attractive to employers simply by dint of being graduates.

(Many employers, still yearn for this simplicity, and, for example, in Britain, recruit from an ever narrower band of universities in the hope of ensuring that a 'good graduate from a top university' is still an exceptional investment).

So, when quality was 'excellence', then quality was 'good'. If quality continues go be defined as excellence then it will continue to be 'good'. However, other definitions have intruded. For example, governments, invoking tax-payers and the balancing of national budgets, define quality in terms of 'value for money'. Value for money requires more students through the system at a lower unit cost. It undermines the reflective time of academics, it tightens the belt on research expenditure, it fails to ensure teaching facilities keep up with the rate of increase in student numbers. Excellence and value for money pull in different directions. Quality as value for money undermines the 'goodness' of 'excellence' and makes it harder to attain. Governments have a very different view of what constitutes value for the money they spend than do many of those in academia. When 'quality' = 'value for money' = 'more for less' then quality looks to be less attractive, indeed it is seen as a 'bad thing'.

And so we could go on, and consider, for example, quality as fitness for purpose, and discover that whether quality is 'good' or 'bad' depends on whose purpose and who judges fitness.

Of course, the scepticism about quality that one hears in higher education is not simply an issue of definition. The various definitions carry with them a considerable amount of other organisational, political and pedagogical baggage.

Quality as control

'Quality' has also become used as a shorthand for the bureaucratic procedures applied to monitor various notions of quality. It is thus, not the quality itself that is regarded as undesirable but the paraphernalia of quality monitoring that is seen as so intrusive. Quality is not so much about what or why but about assurance and assessment. It is about who decides what an appropriate educational experience is, for what purposes and at what cost.

'Quality' is about academic autonomy, about expanding higher education systems, and about consequent funding regimes. 'Quality' has become a political game. It is about control at a time of rapid change. It is this politicisation of quality that has led to scepticism.

However, is such scepticism reasonable? Has external quality monitoring been entirely cynical? Has it failed to lead to quality improvement?

Impact of external quality monitoring

Let us consider some examples of the impact of external quality monitoring.

Much of the evidence about impact of EQM is anecdotal, which is not surprising given that it is a relatively new phenomenon and that 'impact', itself, is a 'deceitful concept' (Saarinen, 1995). In Spain, for example, 'evaluation fever' is seen as having 'developed too quickly, too anxiously, making sometimes too much noise, but showing less effectiveness than expected' (Escudero, 1995). In the United States, with a longer history of evaluation, informed commentators have suggested that the impact is only peripheral (Marchese, 1989).

The limited research evidence suggests that EQM has provided an initial impetus to change, but that it offers little by way of continuing momentum. In the Netherlands, for example, the Inspectorate are of the view that the institutes pay attention to the quality of education in a more systematic and structural way than they did before a systematic process of EQM was established (IHO, 1992). At the institutional level the procedures for gathering information are more formal and there are more systematic procedures for discussion and decision-making about programmes, organisation and so on. However, although quality is clearly on the agenda of institutions, it is difficult to find a linear relation between recommendations made by the visitation committees and measures taken by the institutes (Frederiks, Westerheijden and Weusthof, 1993; Acherman, 1995). In a similar vein, the Inspectorate concludes that institutes, in general, still have problems with the formulation and realisation of consistent, well-planned and managed responses to the reports of visitation committees: improvements are scattered and actions have a *short-term* character.

These conclusions appears to be borne out at the Hogeschool Holland, where EQM has helped to clarify the purpose and focus of internal quality assessment resulting in an improvement in self-evaluation and the development of a self-evaluation management culture (van Schaik and Köllen, 1995). The emphasis, however, has been on developing systems of quality assurance rather than on enabling effective, continuous improvement of the student learning experience.

Initial research into the impact of external quality monitoring in Norway (Karlsen and Stensaker, 1995) and Finland has suggested that, in a significant number of cases, 'the process of assessment alone is of intrinsic value', especially the self-evaluations, which 'create and arena for communication' and provide a 'legitimate way to openly discuss possible solutions to the present complicated problems' (Saarinen, 1995, p. 232) a point also made in a British context by John Rear (1994) and reinforced at a recent OECD conference (Rasmussen, 1995; Bell, 1995; Barblan, 1995; Rovio-Johansson and Ling, 1995). Sometimes self-evaluations are also put to short-term uses within the institution, ranging from internal competition for resources to external marketing of the institution to potential students (Stensaker and Karlsen, 1994).

The Appraisals Process in Ontario also appears to offer an example of the positive impact of EQM. Research suggests that there is sufficient evidence to show that the process, overseen by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) has been effective in maintaining and improving the quality of graduate programmes. Improvement can be seen in terms of quantitative, summative indicators such as completion rates and time to completion, and in terms of improvements in peer evaluations over a seven-year cycle. Although involving both formative and summative assessments, the primary purpose of the OCGS evaluation is programme improvement. The confidentiality and consultative nature of the process has been claimed to be an important part of its effectiveness, which is due to the fact that 'it is co-operative, mandatory, is dynamic and evolving, has gained the "trust" of government, is collegial, and is based within the institutions themselves' (Filteau, 1993, p. 1).

My own observations in South Africa, Sweden, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia and Britain suggest that external quality monitoring acts as a catalyst of one sort or another. However, it is the internal processes that grow up in parallel to external monitoring, or as a direct consequence of external monitoring that have the most impact.

I have already alluded to self-assessment, which is important, not so much for the outcomes it produces but for the very process of dialogue and reflection it sets in train. In Denmark, one institution has developed a whole range of internal quality-related initiatives involving staff, students and senior management, that goes well beyond the requirements of the external monitoring body. Indeed, I would suggest that the Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education, informally regards the institution as an innovator and test-bed for internal quality procedures.

Although there are examples of 'positive' impact and innovatory thinking, there is also a lot of 'compliance' to the requirements of external quality monitoring that does not lead to any identifiable long-tern improvement.

This raises the well-discussed issue of the interrelationship between accountability and improvement in quality monitoring. Where an approach is fundamentally underpinned by an accountability requirement, there is not much evidence that it leads to an integrated process of continuous improvement. Where the central purpose of external monitoring is to enable and encourage improvement then there is a chance

that, in the right circumstances, improvement will continue after the initial impact of EQM.

A simple analogy is that of a space-rocket launch. Accountability-driven EQM provides the initial thrust to get the launch rocket off the ground. In some cases this is sufficient to ensure the spacecraft successfully goes into orbit. In others, the initial impetus is insufficient and the rocket crashes back to ground before the spacecraft gets into orbit. I would suggest that the best that accountability-led EQM can do is to get the spacecraft in orbit, but eventually the orbit will decay and the craft get burned-up on re-entry. If accountability is the limit of ambition, then re-entry burnout is fine — accountability can be re-assessed by launching another rocket five, seven or ten-years later.

To set off on a voyage of discovery, 'to go where no man [or woman] has gone before' (*Star Trek*), requires more than initial momentum: it requires a process that encourages and facilitates the desire and motivation for change. In the second-phase of EQM, it is vital that the emphasis shifts from accountability to improvement, from compliance to self-motivated innovation.

Quality and changes in higher education

Cynicism about 'quality' in higher education is thus superficially linked to a view that it involves an agenda being controlled from outside academia. The changing perceptions of 'quality', from something intrinsically 'good' to something to be treated with suspicion, reflects the complex interrelationship in higher education between:

• massification;

• funding;

• academic autonomy;

• changing student needs.

Massification and the changing needs of students in themselves reflect the pressure of international competition and the internationalisation of labour markets.

'Quality' becomes the focus of attack or derision from those within academia reluctant to face up to changing student needs and preferring an introverted cloisterist approach (as opposed to a responsive collegialism (Harvey, 1995).

'Quality', conversely, becomes the legitimation for ever-more insidious managerialism. It 'conceals' the underfunding of massified systems, it brings with it overbearing and bureaucratic accountability.

So, should we should be focusing on quality at the pinnacle of the pyramid, or on the elements at the base of the pyramid?

We could take a conservative, pessimistic view and say that more students through the system at reducing cost will lead to inevitable intrusion into higher education by outside forces and the undermining of academic autonomy and the cheapening of higher education as it slides into the mire of consumer-oriented training. There is nothing that academia can now do in the face of this inevitable, unstoppable trend. We have resisted as long as we could but the apocalypse is upon us. Playing quality games is to connive in the fundamental deconstruction of higher education. We can do nothing about the base of the pyramid and, if forced to play quality games, will simply comply with requirements without taking them seriously.

We could take a liberal, optimistic view and say that while there is nothing that we can do about these inevitable forces, and we need to embrace them in a positive spirit and applaud the widening of access to higher education even if comes at severe financial cost. We know that higher education can never be what it was, but it had many faults anyway, not least an unrealistic view of the world of work. It hid in its cloisters and perpetuated an élite apprenticeship system that is now outmoded and inefficient. What we must do is to use the quality procedures to help improve higher education. We know their real purpose is accountability, which serves to perpetuate right-wing ideology and legitimate cuts in funding, but they can be subverted to help encourage innovation and a new approach to higher education. There's no point in looking at the base of the pyramid we need to focus on the apex and make the most of the quality opportunities.

An alternative view might suggest that 'quality' is the inevitable outcome of the post-modern condition. To paraphrase 'Dr Criminale' (Malcolm Bradbury) 'postmodernism is like the modern traveller: jet-lagged, culture-shocked and baggageless'. It is transient, disorientating and empty. Postmodernism turns all travel into tourism. We are no longer travellers, we are tourist discovering a reality that has been created for us. Postmodernism is the 'theory' of non-theory, the non-theorising of chaos and post-rationalism. It is constructed out of change. But philosophically, despite its designer-label pretensions, postmodernism is a very small change indeed. Postmodernism has 're-invented' anomie and alienation. However, rather than analyse, postmodernism merely describes the condition. Instead of using the concepts to understand the condition it merely documents its accoutrements and steers clear of the dangerous path of theorising about them. It conceals its impotence with idiosyncratic statements, banal exhortations and meaningless jargon. Postmodernism doesn't want to change the world, it seeks merely to legitimate the tourist version of reality. (Post)Modern travel is stage-managed and, like it, so is quality assurance. Set-piece events, designed to reveal the tourist view of quality, are elaborately played out. 'Quality' is not the essence but the process of performing quality rituals. Quality is superficial, consumerist, the satisfaction of desire. Indeed, quality as 'fitness-for-purpose' is anticipatory of desire.

While I might be more inclined to the liberal view, because it wants to *do* something, I think we must do something else. We must take a dialectical approach: an approach that addresses quality in relation to these other base factors. We should neither see 'quality' as a symptom of the base factors, let alone as entirely determined by them. Nor should we regard 'quality' as something that we can pursue in isolation, detached from the base factors, especially as a disembodied performance.

We need to be clear about what exactly we mean by quality and to disentangle the rhetoric and the partial operationalisations from the fundamental concept. Then we must consider how our fundamental notion is influenced by, and in turn influences, our base factors.

I cannot prescribe how you view quality, but I can suggest how I see it and how that leads me to a position on quality monitoring. Rather than excellence, value for money, fitness-for-purpose or defect-free notions of quality, I suggest that, at root, quality is about transformation.

Quality as transformation

The transformative view of quality is rooted in the notion of 'qualitative change', a fundamental change of *form*. Ice is trans*form*ed into water and eventually steam if it experiences an increase in temperature. While the increase in temperature can be measured, the transformation involves a qualitative change. Ice has different qualities to that of steam or water. It is made up of the same molecules but reacts very differently with its environment.

Transformation is not restricted to apparent or physical transformation but also includes cognitive transcendence. This transformative notion of quality is well established in Western philosophy and can be found in the discussion of dialectical transformation in the works of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Marx. It is also at the heart of transcendental philosophies around the world, such as Buddhism and Janism.

Education is a participative process. Students are not products, customers, consumers service users or clients — they are participants. Education is not a service *for* a customer (much less a product to be consumed) but an ongoing process of transformation *of* the participant.

Parents, teachers, educationalists from primary schools to universities in a variety of countries prefer, overall, the transformation view of quality. It is compatible with what they think education is about.

There are two elements of transformative quality in education, enhancing the participant and empowering the participant.

Enhancing the participant

A quality education is one that effects changes in the participants and, thereby, enhances them. Value-added notions of quality provide a measure of enhancement. Value added is a 'measure' of quality in terms of the extent to which the educational experience enhances the knowledge, abilities and skills of students. A high-quality institution would be one that greatly enhances its students (Astin, 1990). Oxbridge may produce some 'brilliant' first class graduates but having brilliant school leavers in the first place they may not have added very much. However, exactly how much is added depends on the methodology and what is defined as being of value in the first place (Barnett, 1988; CNAA, 1990).

Empowering the participant

The second element of transformative quality is empowerment. Empowering students is a concept that has grown in prominence over the last five years. There are those for whom empowering students lies at the heart of a radical reappraisal of higher education and underpins any assessment of educational quality. There are others for whom empowering students is a contradiction in terms or merely empty rhetoric. Students cannot possibly know what's good for them, nor should they demand more time, effort and resources from a hard-pressed intellectual élite.

Empowering students involves giving power to participants to influence their own transformation. It involves students taking ownership of the learning process. Furthermore, the transformation process itself provides the opportunity for self-empowerment, through increased confidence, self-awareness, and so on.

There are four main ways of empowering students (Harvey and Burrows, 1992). First, empowering students via *student evaluation* — that is, giving students the opportunity to comment on the education they are receiving. A second form of empowerment is to guarantee students minimum standards of provision and give them responsibility for monitoring it, for example, through student charters. Third, give students more control over their own learning. This ranges from allowing students to *select* their own curriculum to students entering into a learning *contract*.

The fourth approach to empowerment is to develop students' critical ability, that is, their ability to think and act in a way that transcends taken-for-granted preconceptions, prejudices and frames of reference. Critical thinking is not to be confused with 'criticism', especially the common-sense notion of negative criticism. Developing critical ability is about students having the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than submitting packaged chunks to an assessor who will tell them if it sufficient or 'correct'. An approach that encourages critical ability treats students as *intellectual performers* rather than as compliant audience. It transforms teaching and learning into an active process of coming to understand. This fourth approach attempts to empower students not just as 'customers' in the education process but for life. It is at the heart of the dialectical process of critical transformation.

Critical transformation

Transformation is a process of transmutation of one form into another. In the educational realm this refers, in part, to changes in the knowledge and abilities of students — the development of domain expertise — but it also refers to the process of coming to understand.

Where work is highly structured, as it is in some schools and in some universities, learners are constrained by this structure to the extent that one can say that they are on the nursery slopes of critical activity. Where the work is less structured, then they can be seen as advanced beginners, well able to ski on marked out *pistes*. However, higher education is about more than just producing skilled acolytes, important though that undoubtedly is. It is also about producing people who can lead, who can produce new knowledge, who can see new problems and imagine new ways of approaching old

problems. Higher education has a role to prepare people to go beyond the present and to be able to respond to a future which cannot now be imagined.

This sounds vaguely utilitarian, as though higher education is to be justified by the utility of its outcomes alone. Yet, there is a long history of higher education being seen as something valuable in its own right because of its effects upon the individual, effects that might show through in the world of wealth generation but which might equally show through in the people's conceptions of themselves, life and the world.

Both cases call for people who can go beyond the givens: people who can draw upon a variety of explanatory frameworks and who can also stand outside them to the extent of recognising their limitations and the degree to which any framework limits, as well as enables, thinking and feeling.

Critical transformation stands in relation to critical thinking in the same way that metacognition stands in relation to cognition. Just as metacognition involves being aware of our thinking processes, of their limitations and possibilities, so too critical transformation depends upon understanding the limits of our frameworks of understanding, an appreciation of when and where they might be profitably used, as well as an insight into ways in which they constrain thought, values feeling and action.

Critical transformation sees quality in terms of the extent to which the education system transforms the *conceptual* ability and *self-awareness* of the student. Critical transformative action involves getting to the heart of an issue while simultaneously setting it in its wider context. It is a matter of conceptually shuttling backwards and forwards between what the learner already knows and what the learner is finding out, between the specific detail and its broader significance, and between practice and reflection (Harvey and Knight, 1996).

Transformative learning involves a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. Abstract concepts need to be made concrete and a core or essential concept identified as a pivot for deconstructive activity. Deconstruction gets beneath surface appearances; be they traditional modes of working, taken-for-granted attitudes, embedded values, prevailing myths, ideology or 'well-known' facts. The core concept is used to 'lever open' the area of investigation. That is, the relationship between the core concept and the area of enquiry is investigated at both an abstract and a concrete level to explore whether underlying abstract presuppositions conflict with concrete reality. Not all concepts will provide a suitable lever — indeed, critical reflective activity involves a constant process of exploration and reflection until the appropriate lever is located. It is like trying to lever the lid off a tin by using and discarding a number of likely tools until one does the job. Then it's time to sort out the contents.

Critical transformative learning is both deconstructive and reconstructive. It is not just a matter of taking things apart and it certainly is not a matter of blowing them up. Once the concept has been deconstructed an alternative conceptualisation, or conceptualisations, needs to be built to enable sense to be made of experience. To deconstruct without proposing an alternative traps the learner in a cage of someone else's making. However, having reconstructed an alternative conceptualisation is not

the end of the story. The process is continuous: the reconstructed alternative becomes the subject of further critical transformative learning.

So, transformation is not just about adding to a student's stock of knowledge or set of skills and abilities. At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context.

Transformation as meta-quality

The transformative notion of quality presupposes a fundamental purpose of higher education. It assumes that higher education must concern itself with transforming the life-experiences of students, by enhancing or empowering them. The transformative conception is, in effect, a meta-quality concept. Other concepts, such as perfection, high standards, fitness for purpose and value for money, are *possible* operationalisations of the transformative process rather than ends in themselves (Harvey, 1994, p. 51). They are, though, inadequate operationalisations, often dealing only with marginal aspects of transformative quality and failing to encapsulate the dialectical process.

For example, seeing quality in terms of perfection ('zero defects' or 'getting things right first time') might be a useful way to cut down the costs of production and monitoring of output but it is indifferent to any absolute evaluation of the attributes of the product and embodies a reductionist view of the nature of the production process. When shifted from the production of inanimate objects to the realms of education, perfectionist approaches to quality have not only little to say about 'standards' but also devalue the transformative process. This devaluation occurs on two fronts. First, a reductionist focus on the minutiae of the chain of customer-supplier interfaces deflects attention from the educative process as a whole. Second, and related to the first, the emphasis on 'zero defects' is incompatible with the learning process and the development of knowledge. Learning and the development of knowledge is fundamentally a process of critique and reconceptualisation, which is the opposite of a defect-free, right-first-time, mechanistic approach to problem solving (Kolb, 1984; Harvey, 1990). In short, a perfectionist process is at variance with a transformative process.

At best, 'right-first-time' or 'zero-defects' may offer an operationalisation of some aspect of the transformative process. Such operationalisations tend to be specifications to be met in codified customer-supplier arrangements. For example, where the approach has been used at the staff-student interface, such as the specification of the turnaround-time for assessed student work (Geddes, 1992), the emphasis has been on the mechanics rather than the content of the feedback.

Similar analyses can be applied to 'fitness-for-purpose' and 'excellence' approaches to quality. They offer a *possible* means by which aspects of transformative quality might be operationalised but are no substitute for getting to grips with the transformative process.

Quality and learning

This focus on, and analysis of quality as transformation highlights the lack of convergence of quality monitoring and innovations in teaching and learning.

In England, and I suspect in many other parts of the world, the drive for quality and the concurrent moves to reform teaching and learning processes have not been connected, organisationally or in practice. Quality as a transformative process cannot be addressed separately from issues to do with assessment, learning and teaching.

A tension has emerged between quality-as-accountability and quality-as-transformation. The predominance of the former meaning has led to a 'compliance culture', such that emphasis on quality is not, in fact, producing the transformation in students that I suggest is the essential goal of teaching and learning in higher education. A goal that is driven in great measure by a future vision of the world economy. Competitive advantage in the global economy is seen as dependent upon having a well-educated workforce. The world is changing rapidly and there is a growing perception that there is a need for people who can accommodate and initiate change. As technology, competition and social upheaval transform the world at an accelerating pace so higher education is increasingly seen as crucial in producing an adequately educated population.

If higher education is play an effective role in education for the 21st Century then it must focus its attention on the transformative process of learning. A prime goal should be to transform learners so that they are able to take initiative, work with independence, to choose appropriate frameworks of reference, while being able to see the limitations of those frameworks and to stand outside them when necessary. To be an effective transformative process, higher education must itself be transformed so that it produces transformative agents: critical reflective learners able to cope with a rapidly changing world.

In this process, quality-as-transformation has a major role. Conservative pessimism, liberal optimism and postmodern cynicism fail to address the dynamic relationship between quality and learning and, effectively detach the quality apex from the base of the pyramid. A dialectical transformative approach to quality envisages a fundamental link between quality and learning and sees quality as informed by and informing the purpose of mass higher education, its funding, the nature, role and autonomy of the academy and its responsiveness to the changing needs of students. Quality improvement is thus not just a game but a process contingent upon a reconception of higher education.

Quality management has a role in the development of transformative quality. Indeed, effective quality management is crucial to the success of any quality initiative in a large organisation. It is essential that management of quality is sensitive, open and transparent: that it enables quality dialogue, generates a quality culture, delegates responsibility for quality and recognises, rewards and supports quality initiatives. Senior managers should actively be involved in initiating quality activity while encouraging local ownership of quality procedures and evaluations. Quality managers must link quality to a broader strategic vision, and ensure that quality and learning mesh together.

This is helped if external quality monitoring encourages a democratic process to develop transformative quality. To do so requires a clear primary commitment to quality improvement and an enabling, trusting, monitoring process rather than an intrusive, bureaucratic, distrusting accountability requirement. Things may be changing, but many countries still place too much emphasis on the politically-driven accountability process.

Sweden is relatively unusual in offering an alternative improvement-led model that appears to be effective in promoting an environment in which transformative quality can flourish.

Sweden provides a rare example of improvement-led model. Although the evolution of the process is stalling under the weight of new political imperatives, the initial dismantling of the highly centralised system focused on the development of an improvement model driven from the bottom-up.

The 1993 higher education reform, under the slogan 'Liberty for Quality', devolved authority from the government to the universities and colleges, whilst simultaneously raising obligations for quality assurance and accountability by institutions. The Swedish model aimed to 'build the quality assurance from the bottom-up rather than top-down'. It encourages initiatives to be taken at any level by any individual rather than await managerial prescriptions. Furthermore, the Swedish system also encourages a variety of methods and mechanisms of quality assurance rather than imposing a comprehensive, homogeneous model on all institutions, disciplines or programmes. In short, the quality assurance system in Sweden is 'intended to become a *quality-driving instrument*, not an administrative obligation' (Bauer and Franke-Wikberg, 1993, pp. 4–6). Quality enhancement is built in from the outset and is not simply 'added-on' in the form of 'dissemination of good practice'. Grading is avoided so as not to detract from improvement agendas, there is much more emphasis on looking at internal procedures for improvement than comparing one institution with another. Students are included in peer review teams and there is a general emphasis on participation across institutions.

However, I do not want to labour any one system, there are others, such as the Welsh system, that are trying to throw off the shackles of accountability.

So, to return to our spaceship. We do not just want to launch it into space, we need to set it on a voyage of discovery. Having a captain helps. But rather than the aimless meanderings of *Star Trek*, quality is only effective if we fully understand it and have some idea where its going. If quality is the 'Starship Enterprise' then we need something more substantial than the (postmodern) performance of the key actors on the bridge.

Beam me up Scotty!

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