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Quality in higher education

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Abstract

This paper argues that quality has been a major concern of higher education during the 1990s. Despite different purposes and approaches to quality monitoring, there has been a convergence to a 'delegated accountability' approach and a common tri-partite methodology. Accountability tends to predominate over improvement as the fundamental process for external systems unlike internal processes, which tend to be linked to continuous quality improvement. However, little quality monitoring is aligned closely with innovations in learning and teaching. The Swedish system is unusual in focusing primarily on improvement and has, as a result, a significant opportunity to relate quality to the learning situation.

Introduction

During the 1990s 'quality' evolved from a marginal position to being the foremost concern in higher education alongside funding issues. The evolution of quality has been one from vague concept to articulated procedures. Furthermore, there is considerable conformity of procedures across national boundaries and the tendency to a dominant model of external scrutiny of quality in higher education.

Approaches to 'quality' in higher education in most countries have started with an assumption that, for various reasons, the quality of higher education needs monitoring. Governments around the world expect higher education to:

- be more relevant to social and economic needs;
- widen access;
- be more cost effective (that is, expand numbers, usually in the face of decreasing unit cost);
- ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons;
- be responsive to a range of stakeholders (including students and employers).

Quality and standards

Before exploring the nature of external quality monitoring in more detail, a brief clarification of the notion of quality in higher education, and its relation to standards, is necessary.

Throughout the world, the quality of higher education is being assessed. This involves operationalising the notion of quality in some way, which in turn requires a clear statement about the concept of quality that is being measured. It appears that far too often, quality assessment and quality assurance processes have started by determining how quality is to be assessed or reviewed rather than by asking what, fundamentally, is it that is to be assessed.

Quality

There are five broad approaches to quality identifiable in relation to higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993); quality as:

- exceptional;
- perfection;
- fitness for purpose;
- value for money;
- transformative.

The *exceptional* view sees quality as something special. Traditionally, quality refers to something distinctive and élitist, and, in educational terms is linked to notions of excellence, of 'high quality' unattainable by most.

Quality as *perfection* sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. In a sense it 'democratises' the notion of quality and if consistency can be achieved then quality can be attained by all.

Quality as *fitness for purpose* sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires. Theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims.

Quality as *value for money* sees quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the 'customer' has a quality product or service. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from higher education reflects a value-for-money approach. Increasingly students require value-for-money for the increasing cost to them of higher education.

Quality as *transformation* is a classic notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge.

Quality issues in higher education are also closely related to issues of standards. Indeed, it is evident that, in debates about the nature and functioning of higher education, there is considerable overlap between the concepts of 'quality' and 'standards'. However, quality and standards are not the same. 'Standards' are specified and usually measurable outcome indicators which are used for comparative purposes (Harvey, 1995).

Standards

In education, standards relate to three areas of activity:
- academic standards;
- standards of competence;
- service standards;
- organisational standards.

*Academic standard*s measure ability to meet specified level of academic attainment. In relation to teaching and learning this refers to the ability of students to fulfil the requirements of the programme of study, through whatever mode of assessment is required. This usually requires demonstration of knowledge and understanding. Implicitly, other skills are assessed, such as communication skills. Sometimes 'higher level' skills, such as analysis, comprehension, interpretation, synthesis and critique are explicitly assessed. For research, academic standards are less precise and usually imply the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition.

Standards of competence measure specified levels of ability on a range of competencies. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; skills required for induction into a profession; and academic (or 'higher level') abilities, skills and aptitudes implicit or explicit in the attainment of an award.

These may be stated or inferred in taught course objectives or be a part of the expectations of competencies to be achieved by research students.

Service standards are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service or facilities provided. Such standards may include turnaround times for assessing student work; maximum class sizes, frequency of personal tutorials; availability of information on complaints procedures, time-lag on introducing recommended reading into libraries, and so on. Benchmarks are often specified in 'contracts' such as student charters. They tend to be quantifiable and restricted to measurable items, including the presence or absence of an element of service or a facility. *Post hoc* measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) are used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.

Organisational standards involves the attainment of formal recognition of systems to ensure effective management of organisational processes and clear dissemination of organisational practices.

Interrelationship between quality and standards

The interrelationship between quality and standards depends on the approach to quality and the particular notion of standard. With five 'definitions' of quality and four 'definitions' of standards there are twenty interrelationships (Figure 1).

The exceptional approach to quality, for example, emphasises the maintenance of academic standards, through the summative assessment of knowledge. It presumes an implicit, normative 'gold-standard' both for learning and for research. The perfection approach emphasises consistency in external quality monitoring of academic, competence and service standards. The fitness-for-purpose approach relates standards to specified purpose-related, objectives. Therefore, in theory, it requires criteria-referenced assessment of students. The value-for-money approach places emphasis on a 'good deal' for the customer and requires the maintenance or improvement of academic standards, of both graduate abilities and research output, for the same (or declining) unit of resource. The transformative approach uses standards to assess the enhancement of students both in terms of academic knowledge and a broader set of transformative skills, such as analysis, critique, lateral thinking, innovation, and communication. As transformation involves empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required.

Purpose

'Quality' has been used as a tool to ensure some compliance to these concerns. However, the rationale and the policy often tend to be worked out after the decision to undertake an audit, assessment or accreditation process has been made. Thus approaches to 'quality' are predominantly about establishing quality monitoring *procedures*.

Quality monitoring procedures thus serve a variety of purposes, that can be grouped together under three headings:

- accountability;
- improvement;
- information.

The accountability function includes three broad concerns. First, accountability to external funders (governments in the main) that public money is spent appropriately. Second, accountability to the sector that principles and practices within higher education are not being eroded or flouted. This form of accountability is mainly used to control the development of private providers but can be used to ensure that public providers do not become lax. Third, accountability to 'customers' to ensure that an appropriate education experience is provided.

The improvement function of quality monitoring procedures is to encourage institutions to reflect upon their practices and to develop what they do. Gone are the days when higher education institutions could take the view that, by dint of their status as institutions of higher learning, they were quality organisations with no need to improve. There is, as has been suggested, growing pressure on institutions to be more responsive to a range of stakeholders and to continually improve to meet changing needs.

A final purpose of quality monitoring procedures is the generation of information. This is both information for funders, which can be used to aid funding allocation decisions and thus links to accountability, and information for users that helps inform choice.

Types of quality monitoring

Quality monitoring in higher education occurs as part of internal institutional procedures and as external to the institution.

Internal quality monitoring

Institutions collect a wide range of data about the services they provide including:
- surveys of student views;
- internal peer review of teaching;
- internal audits of quality procedures;
- surveys of recent graduates;
- employer views of graduates.

Most exercises are designed to elucidate quality judgements with a view to enhancing the quality of provision, for example, peer reviews of teaching designed to share good practice, or surveys of students, graduates or employers designed to identify areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

So, one way or another, a considerable amount of data about stakeholder views is generated that is designed to provide feedback primarily for quality improvement purposes. To be effective in quality improvement, data collected from surveys and peer reviews must be transformed into information that can be used within an

institution to effect change. Furthermore, this information must be linked into a process of feedback and action. In short, there must be a means to close the loop between data collection and effective action.

This requires that the institution has in place a system for:
- identifying responsibility for action;
- encouraging ownership of plans of action;
- accountability for action taken or not taken;
- feedback to generators of the data;
- committing appropriate resources.

Establishing this is not an easy task, which is why so much institutional data generated by surveys or peer reviews is not used to effect change, irrespective of the good intentions of those who initiate the enquiries. This involves encouraging a bottom-up quality improvement process alongside a top-down accountability requirement.

Management, in this approach, has six strategic functions in respect of 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;
- disseminating good practice through an effective and open system of communication;
- encouraging and facilitating teamworking amongst academic and academic-related colleagues;
- delegating responsibility for quality improvement to the effective units that are going to deliver continuous improvement at the staff-student interface.

Most higher education institutions are characterised by either a 'collegiate' structure in which lines of accountability are diffuse and often implicit, and where academic managers are often elected or a hierarchical structure in which lines of accountability are focused and explicit and professional managers are appointed.

It is potentially easier for the hierarchical structure to implement a top-down accountability system, although it is much harder for it to ensure ownership of, and involvement in, the quality improvement process, rather than mere compliance with managerial requirements. Conversely, the collegiate system would appear to be better able to encourage ownership although a real willingness to account for action may be a more difficult procedure to implement.

External quality monitoring

External quality monitoring (EQM) is an all-encompassing term that covers a variety of quality-related evaluations undertaken by bodies or individuals external to higher education institutions. It includes the following.

Accreditation and evaluation of institutions

- External evaluation of institutional status, such as the assessment undertaken by the Consejo Nacional de Univeridades in Venezuela, which evaluates and grants licences to new, experimental higher education institutions and continues to evaluate them until they attain full autonomy (Ayarza, 1993).
- Periodic evaluation of institutional viability such as the accreditation process in the United Sates, which is a self-regulatory process of recognition by non-governmental voluntary associations (Petersen, 1995)
- External assessment of institutional provision, such as that undertaken by the Comité National d'Évaluation (CNE), in France, which evaluates each institution holistically (Staropoli, 1991; Ribier, 1995) but does not in any way accredit the institution.

Audit of procedures within an institution

- External quality audit of internal quality assurance *procedures*, such as the academic audits of institutions formerly undertaken by the Quality Audit Division of the Higher Education Quality Council in Britain (HEQC DQA, 1993) and the audits of Polytechnic quality procedures by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (HEEC, 1997). There is no attempt to evaluate the institution as such, just to ensure that the institution has clearly defined internal quality monitoring procedures that ensure effective action.
- The Australian Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) added a ranking to the examination of quality assurance portfolios volunteered by universities, which was linked to recommendations about additional incentive funding (Meade, 1993). The three rounds of the Australian approach focused on specific elements, such as teaching, research performance or community interaction.
- In Sweden, the approach to audit undertaken by the National Agency is to focus on the stated improvement agendas of institutions and explore the efficacy of improvement projects (Askling, 1997).

Accreditation of programmes of study

- Validation (and periodic review) of programmes of study by central awarding bodies such as the procedures previously undertaken by the Council for National Academic Awards in the UK
- Accreditation of courses in North America by up to 14 non-governmental voluntary associations who recognise provision in institutions 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 (Harvey and Mason, 1995).

Assessment of teaching quality in subject areas or of programmes

- External evaluations of teaching and learning provision at a programme or subject level, such as the assessment of subject area provision undertaken by the Quality Assessment Division of the Higher Education Funding Council for England

(HEFCE, 1994) or the evaluations undertaken by the independent Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education in Denmark (Thune, 1993).

Research assessment

- Evaluation and appraisal of research, such as the Research Assessment Exercise conducted by the Funding Councils in Britain (HEFCE/SHEFC/ HEFCW, 1993) and research evaluations undertaken by the Academy of Finland since the early 1980s (Luukkonen and Ståhle, 1990).

Standards monitoring

- The use of external examiners to monitor standards on postgraduate or undergraduate degrees in the UK, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, Malaysia, Brunei, India, Malawi, Hong Kong and in the technikons in South Africa (Silver, 1993; Warren Piper, 1994).

The organisation, degree of government control, extent of devolved responsibility and funding of higher education systems vary considerably from one country to the next. However, the rapid changes taking place in higher education are tending to lead to a convergence towards a dominant model for quality. This model is one of *delegated accountability*. Central to this process is the emphasis placed on quality as a vehicle for delivering policy requirements within available resources.

Delegated accountability

External quality monitoring is not restricted to one or two types of higher education system . It can be found in all types of higher education systems, including:

- the 'Continental model' of 'centralised-autonomy' found in much of Western Europe including Italy, France and Austria;
- the 'British model' of autonomous institutions also found throughout much of the Commonwealth;
- 'market systems' such as the USA and the Philippines;
- 'semi-market' systems such as Taiwan and Brazil;
- centralised systems such as China;
- newly-devolved systems such as those in Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and Scandinavia.

The development of most EQM systems has been as a result of a pragmatic response to government mandates and systems adapt and respond to changing situations. However, within this fluid situation, some common themes emerge, suggesting a convergence to a dominant form of accountable autonomy (Figure 2).

The systems that have traditionally espoused a market approach and those that have been influenced by the traditional British system of autonomous institutions supported by the state are finding their autonomy being eroded by government-backed requirements to demonstrate accountability and value for money (Bauer and Kogan, 1995). In New Zealand, for example, with a tradition of strong university autonomy,

there is now a requirement for higher education institutions to define objectives that are approved by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 1991).

Where central control was, or continues to be, exerted over higher education, for example in China, Eastern Europe, South America and Scandinavia, there is increasing delegated responsibility for quality, but at the price of being required to be accountable and open to scrutiny. For example, in Romania university autonomy has become the central principle in the governance of higher education institutions. However, the trade-off for academic autonomy is the acceptance of external evaluation mechanisms (Ifrim, 1995).

In those countries where a new accountable autonomy is being granted, self-assessment is seen as indicative of the shift to self-governance. In those countries where universities have traditionally been autonomous, self-evaluation is seen as not only politically pragmatic but a necessary vehicle to ensure the institution focuses its attention on quality issues.

Methodology of EQM

Approaches to external quality methodology in higher education have not only been characterised by a convergence to delegated authority but also a growing uniformity of methodology. Most EQM incorporates various combinations of three basic elements:

- self-assessment;
- peer evaluation;
- statistical or performance indicators.

This is followed up by a report that is usually at least semi-public although sometimes augmented by a confidential additional report. In some cases, funding is linked to the outcomes of the process, although it is rare that significant amounts of direct funding are involved.

Typically, the procedure is for the institution or programme of study (or subject area) to produce a self-evaluation report. This qualitative self-evaluation is often complemented by statistical data. The report (and the appropriate statistical data) are scrutinised by an external body, which subsequently facilitates a visit of 'respected' peers to the institution. The peer-review panel undertake a visit lasting, usually, between one and four days. They attempt to relate the self-assessment document to what they see or, in practice, hear. The peer-review panel may have received other appropriate documents in advance of the visit or may have access to other material during the visit. The peers may observe facilities or even, in some cases, the teaching and learning process. In the main, though, the peer review process usually involves reading the self-evaluation and engaging in discussion sessions with groups of selected institutional mangers, teaching and administrative staff and students.

In the appropriate setting, self-evaluation and peer review can be an significant spur to fundamental self-reflection. If the institution *wants* to explore its purpose, its areas of effectiveness, its weaknesses and future opportunities then self-evaluation, followed by a peer-review process, that involves open dialogue and helpful feedback,

can be an invaluable tool. It can help develop a future strategy for continuous improvement. However, the long-term effectiveness is entirely dependent on the establishment of *internal* procedures and development of a *culture* of continuous improvement. For example, the European-wide, CRE-Audits, undertaken on a *voluntary* basis, have, been useful for most of the universities that have taken part in helping them develop strategic plans. Whether, in the long term, they will result in a process of continuous quality improvement depends on how well the outcomes are communicated and linked in with the day-to-day activities of the teaching and research staff.

Where *compulsory* monitoring uses self-evaluation, peer review and statistical indicators, the efficacy of the methodology is rather more debatable. Where institutional staff see the self-evaluation as part of a judgmental process, especially if it is linked to status rankings or to funding, then there will be a disinclination to be open about weaknesses and a tendency to overstate strengths. A lack of frankness makes dialogue difficult and the self-evaluative process becomes a defensive account rather than an opportunity to explore future development and change. In such circumstances, self-evaluation followed by an inquisitorial peer review encourages retrenchment rather than responsiveness.

Peer reviews are not good at finding out what is really going on. In the main, peer-review teams make judgements based on what they are told and tend to look for discrepancies in the story. They rarely have detailed documentation nor observe what goes on the ground. Even if they have access to appropriate documentation, which allows some form of cross-checking, and they observe facilities and practices first-hand, they tend to see and assimilate only a tiny fragment of the entire institutional operation. Peer reviewers are not trained as investigators — if they are trained at all. What training they have tends to be towards identifying what they should be looking for, but despite the best will of some training programmes, they are not trained how to identify and interpret what they see. In short, the preconceptions and prejudices of peers are rarely challenged prior to visits, even if, on reflection, they considered that they have learned a lot from the process themselves. Peer review is, in the main, gentle amateurism designed not to rock too many boats. A recent study in Chile, for example, suggested that, even in the newly developing private university sector, peer reports, in 90 per cent of cases were simply confirming what the institutions already knew and, furthermore, the prior experience of peer reviewers tends to influence the outcome of reports (Silva, Reich and Gallegos, 1997, p. 31).

Statistical data, often euphemistically referred to as 'performance indicators' are problematic. It is rarely clear about what, or about whose, 'performance' they provide indicators. What, for example does an increase in percentage of 'good' degree classifications tell us about quality? Does it indicate that the student learning performance has improved? Does this mean that the teaching staff have performed better, or are the students learning more despite the teachers? Or does it mean that academic standards have fallen? Similarly, what does the employment rate of graduates within the first six months after graduation tell us about the performance of the institution? Perhaps it says more about the vagaries of the recruitment process and the differential in take-up rates between different subject specialisms than provide any indication of the performance of the institution. In short, so-called performance indicators are invariably simplistic, convenience measures that bear no relation to any

notion of quality. Furthermore, the benefit that might accrue from improving statistical measures to make them into really meaningful performance indicators is outweighed by the cost that would accrue (Yorke, 1998).

In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, performance indicators play a minor role although their popularity tends to wax and wane. In others, such as Australia, there are systematic attempts to develop new indicators. However, in general, there increasingly seems to be a growing tendency to cast doubt on the value of quantitative indicators of higher education quality. In the United States, where quantitative indicators have dominated quality evaluations, there is a gradual shift to giving more credence to qualitative assessments based on peer reviews. For example, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), which has been prescriptive in using quantitative indicators as a basis for allocating up to five per cent of institutional budgets, has, with each of its four iterations of assessment criteria, gradually replaced crude quantitative indicators by qualitative, peer-review evaluations (Banta, 1995).

League tables

League tables are fine for football. Whatever the complexities of the game, the aim of each match is to win and the aim for the season is to win as many matches as possible. As only two teams play each match and for a clearly specified period of time it is easy to award points on the basis of the result and to aggregate the points at the end of the season on the basis that every team in the league plays every other team, both home and away. A league table of universities is not quite so simple. First, there is no single aim for higher education. Second, not all universities have the same set of aims. Third, universities are not 'matched' against each other. Fourth, it is not clear how long the 'season' is, it varies for different aims. Fifth, the criteria for determining a 'win' are not altogether clear. Sixth, there seems to be considerable difficulty in determining the score at any given time. Some of the 'statistics' used to construct university league tables are the equivalent of determining the winners of a football match by counting the number different songs sung by the supporters of each team.

League tables, for something as complex as the operation and performance of a higher education institution, are extremely limited as there are enormous methodological problems in operationalising 'performance' and subsequently constructing appropriate, valid and reliable indicators. The result is that convenience measures are adopted, which are often extremely crude proxies for what is intended to be measured. Frequently, these proxy measures create entirely misleading indications of institutional performance. For example, using six-month post-graduation employment returns as an indicator of the extent to which higher education institutions offer opportunities for graduates to develop employability skills reflects more the procedures of graduate recruiters than the efforts of the institution.

Furthermore, university league tables very rarely compare like with like. If the primary mission of an institution is to teach, what is the point of placing it in a league table with research universities? An analogy would be to have a football league in four divisions with each team playing all the others in their division and then, at the

end of the season, placing the whole lot in one league table ranked on the basis of the total number of goals scored.

League tables, in higher education, are of three types. First, the comparisons of entire institutions based on a single factor, such as research income, proportion of graduates employed within six months of graduation, proportion of first-class degrees, and so on. This data is much more difficult to collect accurately than it seems. Furthermore, small variations in the statistics can result in major changes in position in the league table. Thus statistical bias in data collection renders the ranking irrelevant.

The second type of league table attempts to rank institutions as a whole on the basis of a composite index, in which the compilers weight a range of factors in a way that reflects their own preconceptions or prejudices. So not only is there the problem of compounded statistical bias for each factor but also an unaccountable weighting of factors. The development of league tables of schools in the UK revealed the fatuousness of the composite league table. Government figures were used to produce a league table of top performing schools. Needless to say the league tables were dominated by well-endowed schools used by the white, upper-middle classes. The same data was used by the *Observer* newspaper to produce a value-added league table and the top performers were inner-city schools, often with large proportions of ethnic minority students.

The third type of league table makes comparisons by discipline area. There are few areas of a university in which it makes sense to make institutional comparisons, even assuming that the data is valid and reliable. Such things as institutional environment, pollution levels and equal opportunities might be amenable to institutional comparisons. For most aspects of higher education, the focus is the discipline or department and there is likely to be as much variation within institutions as between institutions. An average teaching quality assessment score for a UK university, for example, would tell prospective engineering students nothing about the quality of teaching that they might expect on a specific engineering degree. It is at the programme level that comparative league tables might be constructed. The question is whether the outcomes would be worth the time and effort that such comparison tables would require.

So league tables are problematic. They are dangerous instruments upon which to base any accountability funding-linked decisions. Furthermore, they do not provide institutions with any clear guides as to how they might improve nor any reliable information on whether, over time, they are improving or not. Finally, they provide misleading information to the users. What is needed for users is accurate, independent qualitative information to help inform choices.

The introduction of external quality monitoring, despite the added workload of self-evaluations and peer reviews, was a useful exercise in focusing attention on 'quality' issues, not least what institutions are for, how they operate and how they could do things better and in a more responsive way. The problem has been that quality processes are not closely linked to developments in learning and teaching. Innovations in learning take place independent of, and sometimes despite, the quality monitoring process. If the aim of higher education is to produce critical reflective lifelong learners, quality monitoring assists very little. In general, quality monitoring

in most countries has put accountability ahead of improvement hoping the latter will follow the former. What has tended to happen is that accountability approaches result in compliance not improvement. In effect, the accountability emphasis does not provide teaching staff or students with a feeling of ownership of, and responsibility for, a process of continuous quality improvement.

Swedish experience

Sweden provides a rare example of improvement-led model. 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 (Bauer and Franke-Wikberg, 1993). While this has a familiar ring about it, the difference is that the obligation on each institution to set-up effective quality assurance systems was not driven by external accountability requirements rather:

> it is improvement-oriented, is centred on local responsibility, seeks to employ the smallest amount of necessary information in reporting systems, and puts the emphasis on practical results and operational feedback.... (Kells, 1992, p. 141)

Sweden has learned a lot from the mistakes and ill-thought out systems in other countries. The process being developed by the National Agency provides a real opportunity to focus primarily on improvement rather than accountability and relate quality improvement to the enhancement of student learning. Indeed, the Swedish model aims to 'build the quality assurance from the bottom-up rather than top-down'. It does not rely on top-down strategies, either operated by the universities' own association, such as the VSNU in the Netherlands, or a state national committee such as CNE in France. Unlike the British system, where accountability is to the level above, the Swedish system is not hierarchical: instead, the emphasis is on stimulating a horizontal approach to evaluation, whilst encouraging co-operation at different levels. 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).

In Sweden, the approach to audit undertaken by the National Agency is to focus on the stated improvement agendas of institutions and explore the efficacy of improvement projects (Askling, 1997). Placing emphasis on an audit of clearly articulated improvement programmes is a fundamentally simple idea, but one that seems to have eluded the monitoring agencies in many countries.

Unlike many other countries quality enhancement, in Sweden, 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.

The Swedish system has led to tangible improvements including improved internal evaluations at course and programme levels, academic teacher training in institutions where such things previously did not exist, improved support for students in preparing papers which in turn has led to higher success rates, improvements in (and in some cases specification for the first time of) institutional visions and *related* strategies.

The approach in Sweden has also placed incremental quality improvement on the agenda of institutions. It has also been both bottom-up and top-down involving both teaching staff and institutional managers. Furthermore, it has not been unduly managerialist and has therefore not unduly alienated academics, this is a major feat compared to the situation in other countries.

Most important of all, the Swedish approach has helped to introduce a change in the academic culture in higher education (which has been faster in some areas than others). This is a long-term project and is at the root of quality initiatives. If the higher education enterprise is to be transformed it needs to be through a cultural shift: short-term pressure, funding incentives, league tables will make no long-term difference. If the Swedish system is making inroads into the academic culture by encouraging reflection on what academics do and how they do it then it will have a long-term pay-off.

If I have one concern about the Swedish approach it is that apparent lack of action and feedback cycle in some Swedish institutions. This may be indicative of the Swedish desire to weight things up carefully and reflect on change before introducing it or it may be the absence of feedback and action *structures* in institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, quality is about a change in culture, which involves a slow process of evolution. The dominant 'delegated accountability' approach to 'quality' that emphasises 'procedures' has led to a degree of scepticism about 'quality' that is counterproductive in the development of a quality culture within institutions — even where quality procedures are in place, albeit not referred to in such terms. For example, in some institutions there is a well-established culture of dialogue between teaching staff and students with consequent amendment of course content, teaching style and assessment procedures. Yet this is often overlooked as a quality process because it lacks the formalism of a prescribed procedure.

Politicians looking for quick fixes can do enormous damage to the process of cultural change. I have been involved in working with institutions and agencies in Sweden since the early 1990s and it is apparent to me that there is a tangible and palpable change. It is perhaps easier to see such change from a distance and it may not be so

apparent for those who work in the sector on a daily basis. The change is evident in the language used, in the shift from an entirely producer-oriented higher education to a more responsive higher education, in the acceptance of student perspectives and the adoption of a more student-oriented approach to learning and teaching. I cannot point to any specific instance and say "quality did that" because these changes may have occurred for other reasons.

No country I know makes serious claims that the level of the student learning has improved as a result of quality monitoring. Indeed, this is a standards, rather than quality, issue. More to the point, as there has been little or no link between quality or standards monitoring and innovations in learning and teaching such claims would be fatuous.

What I can see in Sweden is a system that focuses on improvement and has the goodwill of the people who work in it. This is an asset not to be lightly discarded.

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Figure 1; Quality and standards

Figure 2: Delegated accountability (source H&K)

Figure 1 Relationship between quality and standards.

Standards / *Quality*	**Academic standards**	**Standards of competence**	**Service standards**	**Organisational standards**
Exceptional	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative gold-standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Élitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards in a mass education system.	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional) skills.	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc. 'guarantee' service standards. Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.	Clear role hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on 'traditional values'. Strong emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom. Aversion to transparency.
Perfection or consist-ency	Meaningless, except for an idealistic notion that peer scrutiny of standards or quality will be undertaken in a consistent manner.	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for 'zero defects'.	Primary relevance in ensuring service-standard based quality — mainly in relation to administrative processes (accuracy and reliability of record keeping, timetables, coursework arrangements, etc.)	Right first time. Document procedures, regulations and good practice. Obtain ISO9000 certification.
Fitness for purpose	Theoretically, standards should relate to the defined objectives that relate to the purpose of the course (or institution). Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although as purposes often include a comparative element (e.g., in mission statement) these are mediated by norm-referenced criteria.	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice.	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed in terms of (minimum) standards for the purpose — usually in terms of teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic) and so on.	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based purposes.
Value for money	Maintenance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. That is, ensure greater efficiency. Similarly, improve the process-experience of students. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience (qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment.	Maintain or improve the output of generally 'employable' graduates for the same unit of resource. Similarly, ensure a continual or increasing supply of recruits to post-graduation professional bodies. Provide students with an educational experience that increases competence, in relation to career advancement, which ensures a return on investment.	Customer satisfaction analyses (student, employers, funding bodies) to assess process and outcomes. Students and other stakeholders are seen as 'paying customers'. Customer charters specify minimum levels of service (and facilities) that students (parents, employers) can expect.	Relies heavily on periodic or *ad hoc* reviews of whether organisational structure is effective and efficient, often informed by management information (especially basic output statistics).
Transfor-mation	Assessment of students in terms of the standard of acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation)against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. As transformation involves empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed in terms of *impact* in relation to objectives.	Provide students with enhanced skills and abilities that empower them to continue learning and to engage effectively with the complexities of the 'outside' world. Assessment of students in terms of the acquisition of transformative skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) and the transformative impact they have post-graduation.	Emphasis on specification and assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning *and* the acquisition of transformative abilities.	Emphasis on organisational structure that encourages dialogue, teamworking and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent.