

The Sixth *QHE* Seminar

The End of Quality?

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Impact of external quality assurance on educational standards: an Australian case study

Rob Carmichael¹

Synopsis of Main Findings:

- 66% of respondents believe that in the past decade, higher education standards in Australia have declined as a result of the expansion of higher education.
- 57% of respondents felt that a 70% grade today is not as high a standard as it was ten years ago.
- 50% of respondents rated grades today to be lower compared to grades of ten years ago, with 26% rating them to be between 10-20% lower in quality.
- Respondents were also split 50/50 over whether external quality monitoring has led to more control of education or not.
- Only 19% agreed that external quality monitoring has led to an improvement in the learning situation of students, with 51% disagreeing.
- Only 12.5% agreed that audits to be performed by the new Australian Universities Quality Agency would lead to any improvement in the learning situation of students, with 50% actively disagreeing, and 37.5% unsure.
- Limited direct experience of a bureaucratic external quality control / monitoring culture (as per the UK), does not appear to inhibit Australian academics from being highly sceptical about the value of external QA, especially in it providing any improvement in the learning situation of students.

About the Study:

In response to Lee Harvey's request for feedback from academics about the quality control culture and a purported 'decline' in higher education standards, I organised a formal survey of a population of one hundred (100) people. With one exception (Q6), I used the questions Lee had prepared and selected people to participate for one or more of the following reasons:

- Their role included responsibilities for quality and academic standards;
- Their active or recent participation in academic committee work;
- Their involvement in academic development work;
- Their involvement in 'quality-related' activities (self-assessments, audits etc).

This population was targeted in an attempt to capture an informed response on the 'decline in standards' issue with 86% having been in higher education for more than ten years. Ethics clearance

for the survey was granted on the understanding that the case study would remain anonymous. For this reason there is to be no public acknowledgment of the identity of individual respondents, or of the organisation(s) involved* (see footnote below).

The survey response rate was 44% which, given the compression of time for response due to a combination of the ethics clearance process and the Easter holidays, was reasonable. A report of the tabulated data set from the survey is attached. Time has not allowed for a detailed analysis of the quantitative data set against all of the demographics, or an in-depth analysis of all the qualitative material contained in the respondents' comments. I would like to thank my colleagues Michael Moriarty and Catherine Barber for their great assistance in preparing this study.

A brief history of External Quality Assurance in Australian Higher Education:

Unlike institutions in the UK, and even in NZ, Australian universities have only had a brief period of exposure to a fully-developed external Quality Assurance regime, but all that is about to change.

In the early 1990's the then Labour government ended the binary system of universities and colleges of advanced education to form the 'Unified National System'. To ensure standards were appropriate for institutions with newly won university status, the 'Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education' (CQAHE) was established with a brief to audit all Australian public universities. There were only three rounds of external audits performed between 1993 and 1995 before the committee was wound up. The most contentious aspect of the CQAHE regime was probably the published 'grouping' (ranking) of institutions favouring universities with an established research profile. This despite assurances that 'diversity' was a virtue, even in a 'Unified National System'.

From 1996 to 2001, external QA went into a period of 'minimalist reporting'. First an annual report went to the Higher Education Council (now defunct), and then the variously titled Commonwealth Department for (Employment), Education, Training (and more recently Youth Affairs), required that universities only submit an annual 'Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan'. These 'plans' (more like reports really) were however public documents. There were no external audits or assessments.

In December 1999 the Minister of the current Liberal / National Coalition government, announced the establishment of a new 'Australian Universities Quality Agency' (AUQA). The Agency will commence auditing universities in 2002 and have visited all institutions by 2006. Unlike the CQAHE, the Agency will not officially rank institutions, but again the audit reports will be public documents, and it has the power to reduce funding and/or suspend a 'deficient' institution's accreditation status.

It is important that the relatively under-developed quality control culture and the limited experience of *external* quality monitoring of staff in Australian universities be remembered when considering the survey results. Only 29% of the respondents indicated that they had been *directly* involved in any external quality assurance activities.

The Survey Results:

There were two main statements that participants were asked to respond to:

Figure 1

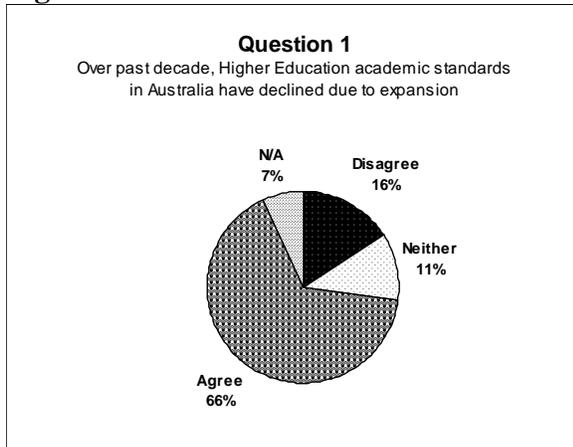
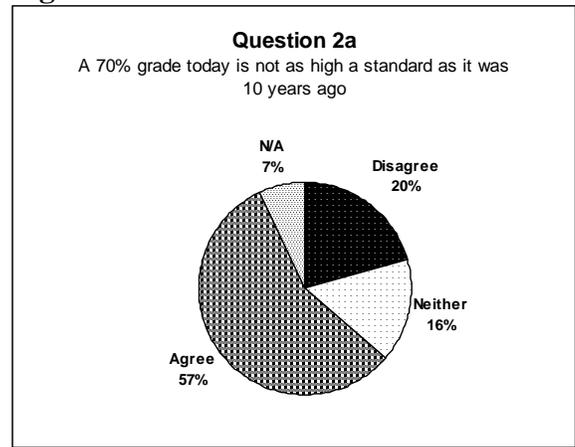


Figure 2



Q1 In the past decade, higher education standards in Australia have declined as a result of the expansion of higher education.

This question followed immediately by two subsidiary questions on the ‘rating’ of grades, obviously caused confusion for some respondents. Some who agreed or strongly agreed that standards had declined, and that a 70% grade today is not as high a standard as ten years ago, rated grades as being *higher* today, while others rated them to be lower. The confusion probably stemmed from the close proximity of the words ‘grades’ and ‘standards’, with some indicating that a *grade* today was inflated compared to one given 10 years ago (because the standard expected had fallen since then). While others presumably felt that the *standards* of today were lower (ie. indicating for example that a 70% grade today is worth less than that of ten years ago). Several respondents also pointed to the need to focus on minimum threshold standards, rather than on what 70% might now be compared to then.

With these caveats in mind, the raw results for Q2a & 2b are Figures 2 and 3 respectively. However, when the data is recalculated to indicate only a decline in value of current grades, the results are as Figure 4.

Figure 3

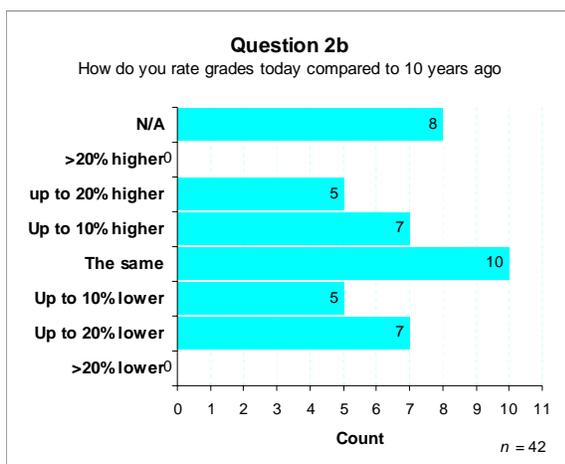


Figure 4

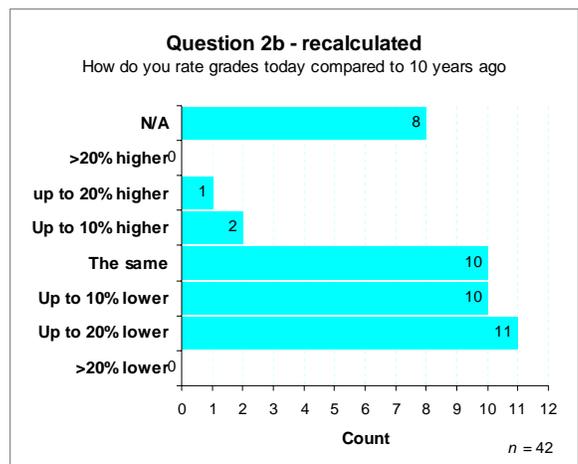
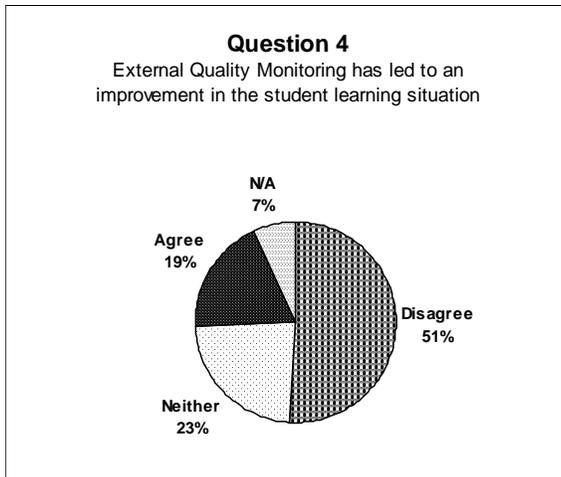


Figure 5



Recalculated, the results show a 50/50 split between those who rated grades to be lower, and those who rated them to be higher, the same, or felt they were not in a position to know. This little exercise shows how easy it is to conflate various aspects of the quality and standards debate unless care is taken with how we use the terms.

The other main statement in the survey for response follows overleaf.

Q4 External quality monitoring (such as external audit, assessment, accreditation) has led to an improvement in the learning situation of students (Figure 5).

There were also a number of subsidiary questions that expanded on the two main statements. Please see the discussion following and the report at the end of the paper for a fully tabulated set of results to the main questions.

Discussion

'The End of Quality' Seminar has three major themes:

1. Has external quality review had its day?
2. Has control of quality been usurped by the market and by information technology?
3. Does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?

For this parallel session, Lee Harvey requested that I discuss the survey results in relation to the issues raised by these three main themes.

1. Has external quality review had its day?

Remembering that in Australia, it could well be argued that with the possible exception of accreditation, 'external quality review' hasn't really yet had its day, the survey results still indicate a fairly sceptical Aussie attitude towards the value of external quality review.

In an attempt to coax an answer for this question, I assumed that the most important contribution that external quality review could ever make is 'improvements in the learning situation of students' (rather than in issues to do with institutional accountability and control), and then compared results for two questions:

Q4 'External quality monitoring has led to an improvement in the learning situation of students?'

And

Q6 'Do you believe that external audits to be performed by the new AUQA will lead to any improvement in the learning situation of students?'

Figure 6

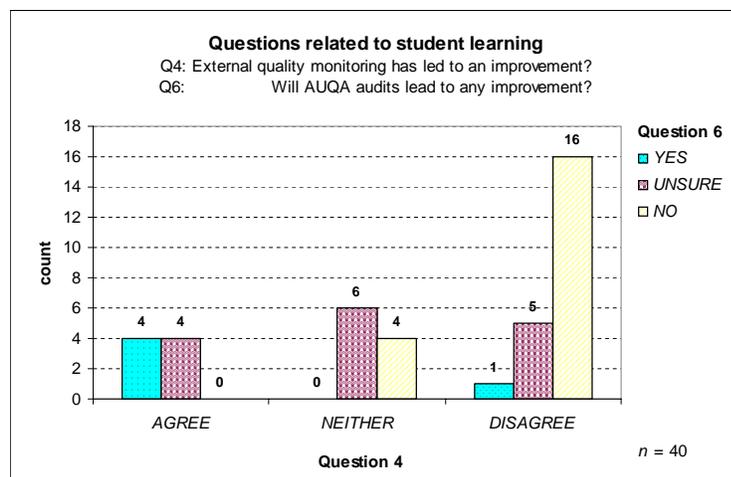
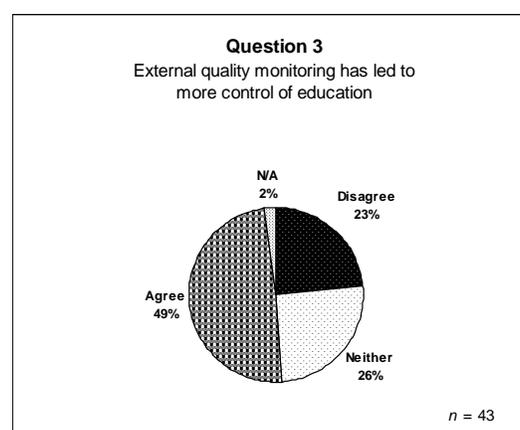


Figure 7



The first question tested respondents' attitudes based on their past experience of external quality monitoring, while the second gives an indication of future expectations of external QA. (Figure 6)

While Figure 5 indicates that only 19% thought external quality monitoring had actually contributed to an improvement in the learning situation of students, a mere 12.5% thought that future audits by AUQA would, compared with 37.5% who were prepared to withhold judgement on what effect AUQA audits might have. Given that two thirds of respondents believed that Australian higher education standards are in a state of decline, it is not surprising that 50% believed that future external quality reviews will make little, if any difference at all to the learning situation of students. The written comments suggest that commercialisation, 'managerialism' and lack of resources are the major factors.

If on the other hand we just accept that the primary purpose of external quality review is to extend control over education, the results for Q3 (Figure 7) show an even 50/50 split between those that believe that it does, and those who believe that it doesn't. Whether they think that increased control over education is a good thing or not is another issue. Examination of their written comments suggests that while some do, many (mainly academics) don't.

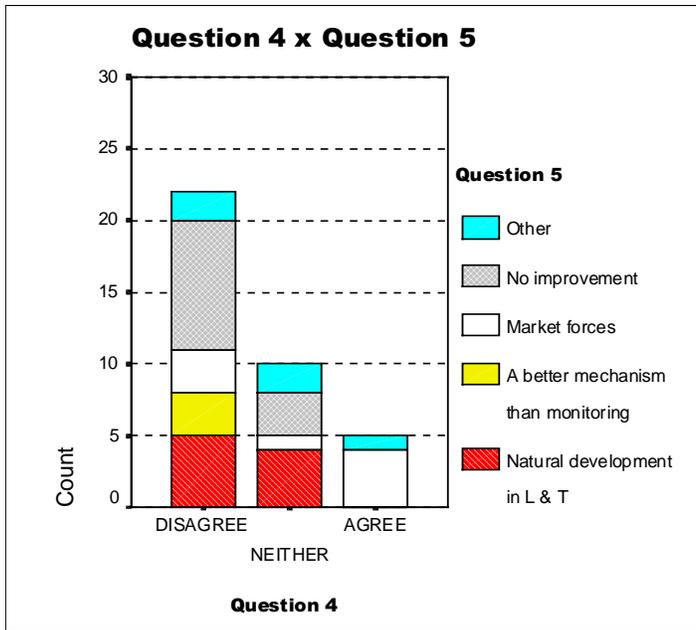
So does the evidence indicate that external quality review has had its day in Australia, even before it gets started? Clearly the results indicate that the tide is running against strong support for external quality review, though a sizeable minority (37.5%) were prepared to withhold judgement on what good the AUQA might or might not be able to do.

2. Has control of quality been usurped by the market and by information technology?

The survey results throw little direct light on this question. Though approximately 50% of respondents felt that external quality monitoring has led to more control of education, when the responses to Q5 are analysed there is little direct information about the role of the market and IT in improving the learning situation of students (Figure 8)

Interestingly though, 'market forces' was the most popular choice for those who agreed that external quality monitoring had led to improvements in the learning situation of students (interesting in that this category of response should not have been included in Q5). While 'natural developments in

Figure 8



learning & teaching’ (which may or may not involve increased use of IT) was the most popular factor for those who disagreed. However, the single largest result category for Q5 was ‘no improvement’, suggesting that the jury is still out on the question of what rather than external quality monitoring might have led to an improvement in the learning situation of students.

On the proposition ‘control of quality has been usurped by the market and by information technology’, the survey results are not conclusive one way or another.

3. Does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?

What do we *really* think when we consider this rather apocalyptic sounding statement - ‘*the end of quality*’? Is it the end of ‘*academic quality*’- as in the erosion of high academic standards, caused by the trend to mass higher education? Or is it the demise of ‘*quality as transformation*’ - as in improvement of the learning situation of students? Or does the development of mass education mean the end for the ‘Quality regime’ - as in that the whole external quality control / monitoring bureaucracy is now doomed, and about to come crashing down around its own ears? The key modifying word in the question is of course the word ‘*necessarily*’.

3.1 Quality as high academic standards:

As indicated on pp3-4 above, the results for Q1, Q2a & Q2b (recalculated) point to support for the proposition that there has been a substantial decline in academic standards in Australia over the past decade as a result of the development of mass higher education. Does this though ‘*necessarily*’ mean the end of quality? Surely it depends on our working definition of quality? If it’s ‘the pursuit of excellence’ by an academic elite, the answer quite probably is - ‘yes’. If on the other hand, in the context of the development of mass higher education, it is ‘fitness-for-purpose’ or ‘value-added’ or ‘transformation’ the answer conceivably is - ‘*not necessarily*’!

3.2 Quality as improvement in the learning situation of students:

The major problem here is that the crucial question was not really asked:

‘Has there been *any* improvement in the learning situation of students over the past decade?’

What was asked was whether people felt that *external quality monitoring* had led to an improvement in the learning situation of students, and then only if ‘other than this’, what factors had contributed to improving the learning situation of students? It is clear that the primary purpose of *external* quality monitoring is thought to be quality control / QA, rather than educational quality improvement.

Certainly the majority of respondents felt that external quality monitoring had little if anything to contribute towards improving the learning situation of students, and the largest single ‘other than’ category was ‘no improvement in learning & teaching’, followed by ‘natural developments in learning & teaching’ and ‘market forces’.

One respondent probably summed it up fairly well with the following comment:

“Quality monitoring doesn’t necessarily translate into improvement of learning outcomes, what will improve learning situation for students is the quality of the learning relationship between teachers & students and create new and innovative learning opportunities.”

(Educational Developer with more than ten years experience in higher education, highest academic qualification in Education - no direct involvement in external QA.)

3.3 Quality as external quality control / monitoring:

A number of those most critical of external QA were so because they felt it fails to engage with learning & teaching quality issues, focussing instead on bureaucratic quality control:

“Monitoring is just a meaningless bureaucratic exercise which staff don’t take seriously – the people doing quality monitoring are not monitoring quality at all they are just collecting papers and data that they can present to the next layer up.”

And, in relation to external audits to be performed by the AUQA:

“Just another bureaucratic exercise that makes government departments feel they are doing something.”

(Academic Manager with more than ten years experience in higher education, highest qualification in Science/Technology, no direct involvement in any external ‘Quality’ programs.)

The results for the two survey items dealing directly with the quality control culture in Australia are set out overleaf.

The graph shows that the largest single category of respondents agreed that external quality monitoring led to more control of education, but these people are fairly divided on whether future

audits by AUQA will lead to any improvement in the learning situation of students or not.

On the other hand, those who disagreed or were non-committal about external QA leading to an increase in control, were more likely to be pessimistic about the possibility of AUQA audits improving the learning situation of students.

Given the relatively small number in the survey population with any direct experience of external QA, it appears that many respondents were prepared to judge the future effectiveness of external QA without necessarily having had any direct experience of it. Could there be a conviction (held a priori) that external QA cannot improve the learning situation of students, under any circumstances?

However, 37.5% of respondents were prepared to withhold judgement – one such commenting on the prospect of AUQA improving the learning situation of students:

“I believe it can, and should, but not sure if it will.”

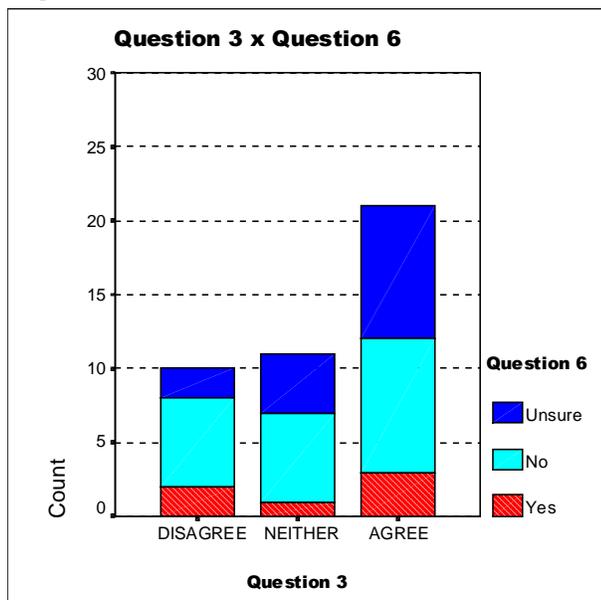
(Academic Manager, more than 10 years experience in higher education, no direct involvement in any external ‘Quality’ programs)

Either way, the current relatively under-developed external QA culture in Australia is a bit of a problem when trying to explain the responses to this question with any certainty. What will happen to such attitudes when the AUQA is up and fully operating?

I would like to conclude this discussion with a comment from one of the more ‘sceptical’ respondents that I think nicely encapsulates the complex issues involved:

“Because organisations become preoccupied with proving what they are doing – find sure-cut measurables to make objective – this distracts from the real business of teaching because commodified curriculum lends itself to these ends. It does not necessarily improve outcomes in terms

Figure 9



of higher order thinking skills which is the real learning objective for universities if they are to be productive for society as a whole.”

(Teacher/Researcher, more than 10 years experience in higher education, highest qualification in Humanities/Social Science - no direct involvement in external QA.)

Conclusion

There is a fundamental paradox at the heart of the data gathered for this study that affects the interpretation of the survey's findings.

On the one hand, the majority of respondents felt fairly strongly that academic standards in Australia are in decline and that external QA has been fairly ineffective, especially in improving the learning situation of students. On the other, academics in Australian universities have had only limited experience of external QA, compared with their colleagues in the UK, and compared even with those in NZ, external QA requirements in Australia are currently pretty minimal.

This raises the question - to what extent have respondent attitudes been formed by their direct experience of external QA, or been shaped by other influences?

This suggests a couple of intriguing propositions for further discussion:

- Given the current 'minimalist' external quality regime in Australia, and if our academic standards are in such a state of decline as the majority of respondents in this study believe, would a stronger external QA regime be able to address the purported decline? What does the experience of others suggest?
- If even a 'well-developed' approach to external QA is incapable of addressing a purported decline in academic standards, what other solutions are there to address such a decline? What does the experience of others suggest?