The Sixth *QHE* Seminar

Quality Improvement Alive and Vital in US Accreditation

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Abstract

The US prizes heterogeneous institutions responding creatively to the diverse needs of American society and economy. No assurance system that measures every institution against one quality standard will support this goal. In a higher education market where institutions struggle for advantage, the largest US accreditor has implemented an alternative accrediting process (AQIP) that helps an institution incorporate quality improvement principles and strive toward self-chosen improvement targets to strengthen its competitive position. Fundamentally different from traditional quality assurance, which uses sporadic inspections to judge institutions against fixed standards, AQIP uses institutions' ongoing documentation of quality improvement to provide public quality assurance.

Introduction

The Higher Learning Commission is one of two commissions of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), which was founded in 1895. With the assistance of a three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Commission has developed an innovative, voluntary alternative process for maintaining accreditation centring on the 'quality principles'(Freed *et al*., 1997) that underlie total quality management (TQM), continuous quality improvement (CQI), the US Department of Commerce's Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) programme, ISO 9000/2000, various state-sponsored quality programmes, and similar efforts to improve organisational performance. Many of these principles, such as, basing decisions on data, decentralising control, empowering faculty [i.e. academics/teaching staff] and staff [i.e. administrators] to make decisions that affect their work, focusing on process, have long

been traditions in higher education, although their form and the breadth of their practice in particular institutions varies greatly. Other components, such as 'systems thinking' and 'customer focus', are at first sight not a part of the academic tradition, but ultimately turn out to be in close alignment with the values and behaviours of the majority of educators.

Supported by a three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the effort to introduce this new alternative comes at what many accreditors perceive as a perilous time in US higher education. Complex dynamics, including increased competition, new technology, new economic forces, and changing societal perceptions of the role of higher education, threaten academia's traditional structures and standards, and require educational leaders to find new tools for managing their operations and for increasing the value a college or university can deliver to those who look to it for services. By aligning accreditation and the quest for ever-improving quality, NCA's Academic Quality Improvement Project [i] (AQIP) believes it can help its member institutions better face these challenges and thrive in a rapidly changing environment.

This new approach is founded on the recognition that quality is not a destination, but a journey, and that very different institutions can pursue their unique mission equally effectively. Students, parents, employers, politicians, faculty can all define quality in higher education in a variety of different ways. Is one definition right and the rest wrong? It is tempting to seek an absolute, a good-for-all-time unshifting bedrock definition of what constitutes a quality education (or a well-educated person, or a first-rate college) but it is difficult to enshrine the preference of any one individual or group, and to dismiss the valid and sincere needs of all the others. Subterfuge downgrading, such as selecting one preference to be called 'education' while the others are downgraded to 'training', seems equally arbitrary.

In the end, we are forced to face up to the truth that the ideal education for me may not be your ideal. We both can have valid, reasonable expectations, good intentions, and differing understandings of what makes for a quality education. Quality assurance can recognise this fact, that there is no single 'quality' to assure, only by building a system that drives every institution toward doing what it does better, whatever its mission, programme mix, or intended students. NCA believes it has a model for accreditation that does exactly that.

The new model is not one that NCA's Higher Learning Commission proposes to substitute for traditional accreditation[ii] and impose on all institutions. It is an alternative designed to be so attractive that its greater benefits and reduced drawbacks will induce a significant proportion of member institutions to elect to use it, wholly or in parts, voluntarily. The AQIP model for continuing accreditation is based on an institution's systematic approach to the continuous improvement of its educational programmes and supporting processes. The Commission's target is a thoughtful but swift development of this alternative model. NCA senses strongly an urgency for higher education more systematically to employ quality principles. Recognising that, for a variety of understandable reasons, academia's adoption – or adaptation – of quality principles and tools has moved slowly, the Commission is anxious to provide a means of aligning

accreditation with an institution's quality initiative. To do so, NCA believes, may be a powerful tool in helping educators reap the benefits of the quality movement.

The Commission's 'stretch' goal in this effort is ambitious: to develop, test, and implement a programme that will affect, voluntarily, one-third of the institutions preparing for on-site evaluations in 2004–05. The Commission is convinced that over time the results of this new approach (a well-publicised and celebrated effort by more than 300 of the Commission's institutions involved in structured intensive programmes to improve educational quality) will provide the yeast to raise quality dramatically throughout the US higher education system. NCA sees its Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) as a catalyst for educational reform at a critical time: when higher education's organisational structures, educational delivery processes, and competitive climate (nationally and internationally) are rapidly changing.

Assurance versus improvement

AQIP's underlying assumption is that an institution with a robust, comprehensive quality-improvement programme, focused on educating students, meets or exceeds, *ipso facto*, NCA's traditional expectations for accreditation. As many other enterprises have discovered, the best assurance that an organisation performs quality work comes from examining its processes, its efforts to improve them, and the actual performance results achieved by the processes that the institution has worked to improve. Accreditation cannot possibly assure higher educational quality by inspecting each and every student that the nation's colleges and universities graduate. Nor is there convincing evidence to support the assumption that institutional resources are a reliable index to the educational value students receive. Therefore, it seems logical to use evidence of both a college's efforts toward improvement and the results of those efforts to assess the value of the educational services it provides.

While quality assurance often forces homogeneity, quality improvement provides an effective strategy to promote sought-after distinctiveness, diversity, and differentiation. Since the US prizes heterogeneous institutions responding creatively to the diverse needs of American society and economy, quality improvement is more attractive than mere assurance in promoting its broadly supported goals for higher education.

Shaped by history, politics, economics, social needs, and changing views of learning and achievement, US higher education's complex dynamics — hard-nosed competition, new technology, changing economics, and shifting societal perceptions of the role of education — threaten Academia's traditional structures and standards, and require educators to find new tools for increasing the value a college or university can deliver to those who look to it for services. Given this broad and intensely competitive US market in higher education, where institutions strive for a niche or an advantage over their rivals, many get their 'edge' by incorporating quality improvement principles that focus on responding quickly and effectively to the distinctive requirements of their students and other stakeholders. By aligning accreditation with this quest for distinction, the Higher

Learning Commission believes it can help its member institutions better face these challenges and thrive in a rapidly changing environment.

In designing, developing, field-testing, and implementing its new processes and services, AQIP will:
- integrate contemporary quality principles by emphasising the core values of quality improvement, particularly their focus on institutional processes and results rather than resources;
- focus accreditation on the improvement of teaching and learning, and involve faculty more directly in all academic improvement processes;
- deliver tangible value to institutions of higher education, including practical, timely feedback and support institutions can use to improve students' educational performance;
- customise its processes to fit institutional needs and priorities, avoiding the prescriptive 'one-size-fits-all' methods of traditional accreditation, and reducing where possible the intrusiveness, cost, and decade-long cycles of improvement associated with current accreditation;
- use communications and computing technology in sophisticated, imaginative ways to make accrediting processes less costly and more effective;
- make comprehensible, useful information about institutional quality available to the public and other stakeholders in accreditation, including information that recognises and celebrates institutional distinctiveness and outstanding achievements;
- modify itself quickly to meet new conditions and new institutional and stakeholder requirements in a dynamic educational environment.

Criteria for quality higher education

AQIP employs of a set of quality criteria that provide a regimen for higher education institutions wishing to examine systematically opportunities for improving their effectiveness. AQIP's criteria see the education of students as the central focus of any institution, and will not permit a college to 'do quality' while ignoring the processes that shape students' minds. Using the complete set of criteria as the framework for a comprehensive review, an institution will assess its overall progress in the journey toward quality, and identify those particular systems where the opportunities for improvement are greatest as well as institution-wide issues that deserve closer attention. In addition to structuring institutional self-assessment, the criteria will also provide the framework for NCA feedback that will reinforce the institution's quality efforts.

The criteria are not normative, prescriptive, or proscriptive: they do not tell an institution how it should organise or operate itself, nor do they suggest specific inputs or outputs institutions should have. Instead, the criteria provide a set of lenses through which an institution can view itself. Each criterion focuses on a system, a group of related processes, posing open-ended, process-focused questions that seek to explore how effectively a particular system helps the institution achieve its core mission and vision. The criteria provide institutions with fresh appraisals and insights into improving their

own operations. As they set themselves programmes for improvement, institutions will use the criteria strategically, one or a few at a time each year, to investigate and improve the workings of a particular system or group of systems. However, in focusing on individual criteria, institutions must remain aware that what determines overall success is the total quality system, which depends on performance in all criteria, not just one or a few. AQIP's regular quality reviews, which involve simultaneous independent review of an institutional assessment by multiple reviewers followed by a consensus process among all reviewers designed to produce a single feedback report, will ensure that institutions maintain this broader perspective.

Each year, the criteria structure, the set of criteria itself and the questions asked within each criterion will be re-examined to discover how changes might make the criteria a more useful tool for institutional self-understanding and improvement. Although the wording, organisation, and specific questions asked may alter somewhat each year, the overall purpose of the criteria will remain constant, as will the philosophical principles that guide them. Consequently, institutions using the criteria to guide their quality initiative need not worry that wording changes will disrupt the overall impact and value of the system.

Different processes

NCA has developed and implemented AQIP to help institutions strengthen themselves by helping them choose their improvement targets wisely and work hard to achieve them. Fundamentally different from traditional quality assurance, which uses sporadic inspections to judge institutions against fixed standards, AQIP uses institutions' ongoing involvement in quality improvement to make a quality assurance determination.

In traditional US accreditation, visits generally take place once a decade. Normal quality assurance requires institutions to meet the NCA criteria and other baseline standards, following which accreditation is reaffirmed for ten years. An institutional self-study committee typically spends a year or more putting together a report which too often gets filed away after the visit, left to gather dust on a shelf for the next ten years.

The AQIP approach provides for more frequent interactions, as often as every year as determined by the institution and AQIP. In addition, there are other meetings that take place with AQIP staff either at our offices or at other locations (for example, informational meetings and strategy forums). More frequent contact fosters a more collaborative relationship between the institution, AQIP, and other partners, and creates an atmosphere actually conducive to the acceptance of advice and the desire for change.

In place of a decennial inspection visit, AQIP has fashioned an array of other interactions with institutions designed both to create the base of information upon which NCA can base ongoing quality assurance and to stimulate and drive the improvement of institutional quality. One of these, the strategy forum (every three to five years), provides an opportunity for institutions to test, against their peers' perceptions, the projects and goals they have set themselves in their effort for continuous improvement. Before coming

to a strategy forum, an institution self-assesses its systems for achieving its goals and identifies a 'vital few' set of projects on which it wishes to work, both to move itself toward fulfilment of its mission and as a means of learning more about quality improvement. In effect, this becomes its plan for improvement over a 3–5-year cycle.

A strategy forum includes teams from a variety of different institutions covering the spectrum of educational providers: two-year technical and specialised colleges through comprehensive and research universities. By mixing colleges of very different types, the strategy forum enables institutions to learn from peers they would ordinarily never encounter, and to share their insights and approaches with colleges and universities who might never otherwise never have the experience to examine deeply what they are doing.

The personnel involved in traditional self-study in preparation for a team visit typically include the chief executive, a self-study chair, and one or more committees established solely for this purpose. Broad-based participation is limited, and those who do participate do so in a reactive mode, stimulated by an outside force, the accreditation visit. In AQIP's quality improvement model, leaders and leadership teams across the institution may be involved, including faculty, staff, students and others. Broad-based involvement helps to ensure a key characteristic of quality: meeting the needs of students and stakeholders. The institution identifies its strengths and the areas for improvement. Collaborating with AQIP and a group of peer institutions, reachable targets and a plan for improvement are set and implemented, with coaching and support from peers, AQIP and others as needed.

Three to five years following a strategy forum, an institution produces a 75–100 page comprehensive analysis of its quality systems, including data documenting the results these systems are achieving (including comparisons with results of similar systems in other institutions). This report is read and responded to by trained examiners, who provide the institution with a comprehensive feedback report, produced through a consensus process. If evidence indicates an institution's quality efforts and accomplishments are disappointing, AQIP provides a variety of means for an institution to get back on track. If an institution can not or will not make demonstrable progress toward improvement, AQIP will discretely return it to the traditional accreditation process

The costs for quality improvement may be higher than for quality assurance, although this depends on a variety of factors. Higher costs, initially, may result in savings over the long term. The end results promised by the quality-improvement model may make any higher costs worthwhile.

Selective participation to forge a different relationship

Acceptance in AQIP presupposes an institution meets baseline standards, allowing the institution to focus on its quality. Only institutions already accredited by NCA will be eligible to use this new regimen. There will still exist a rigorous process by which new members are admitted to the Association, one defining what distinguishes a higher

education institution from other organisations. For institutions already accredited, AQIP will provide a means of keeping the institutional focus on quality improvement, and will enable an institution to continue in accredited status so long as it continues to provide the Commission with convincing evidence that its quality initiative is vital and effective. For most institutions, AQIP will feel far less intrusive than the traditional one, since an institution committed to quality will be required to do little 'for accreditation' that it would not have done anyway, for itself. In addition, AQIP was designed to avoid activities that do not add to the institution's 'value chain,' thereby minimising bureaucracy and unnecessary paperwork while maximising the worth of the institution's efforts.

More importantly, AQIP actively encourages institutions to collaborate to help all boost their effectiveness. Traditional quality assurance promotes a one-to-one relationship between an institution and its accrediting agency, to which an institution looks for approval but not for help. In inspection-based quality assurance, there are infrequent contacts or interactions with the assurer, and a confrontational, adversarial relationship is the norm. The institution risks being unable to continue operating unless it maintains its accreditation, and so does its best to conceal rather than confront its flaws. The assurers come on the lookout for gaps, examining each university independently, avoiding prejudicial direct comparisons with others, focusing on judgement rather than assistance.

Yet it is in this arena that accreditors (who see the entire panorama of practices in higher education) could, potentially, make their greatest contribution. Quality assurance agencies enjoy a unique vantage point for identifying the outstanding practices and process improvements from which an institution in need of help could most benefit. However, if they insist that their role is solely to judge, to assure quality but not to coach and assist institutions to improve it, quality assurance agencies squander this potential and allow an institution to grope randomly for solutions to which the agency might easily point. AQIP's intention is to become a collaborator with its institutions, to help them achieve their visions of serving their students and other constituents as well as they wish. By networking them together, by encouraging them to share their 'secrets' with others (who, generally, are not their direct competitors), AQIP can help create a situation in which the public perceives an overall rise in the quality of US higher education, an increase in trust and public confidence from which all institutions will benefit.

Conclusion

The need for the swift development of a new accreditation process is pressing. Developing a new model can not be allowed to take years, because many institutions do not have years to wait for a more effective system of support from their voluntary accreditation commissions. Accelerating changes (in management, technology, the demands of students and other institutional stakeholders, student mobility and transfer, the entry of new providers into the higher education market) have made it clear that institutions must actively compete for students. Those that survive the competition will be the institutions that can deliver the highest quality educational services to their students; whether 'quality' is defined by cost, convenience, graduates' acquired skills and

knowledge, institutional reputation and prestige, or a combination of these and other factors. Nor can regional accreditors continue to view their institutions' needs from the complacency bred by a century of monopoly during which institutions had little choice but to accept the 'services' accreditors offered them. There is an urgency that requires accreditors to behave as if *they* were driven by competition to improve their services to member institutions, just as their member institutions are being driven by intense competition to improve *their* services to students. The Commission believes its credibility demands it act and demonstrate flexibility. The Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Project, structured to design and implement a new quality-based alternative to traditional accreditation, is NCA's dramatic response to this set of needs.

With AQIP, quality improvement is alive and vital.

References

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[1] Additional current information about NCA's Academic Quality Improvement Project can be found at the Project's website, http://www.AQIP.org, and at NCA's website, http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org. AQIP's Quality Criteria can be downloaded in PDF format from http://www.aqip.org/criteria.html

[2] The traditional US regional accreditation process consists of a 1-2 year self-study, prepared by the institution and read by a team of peers, which then visits the institution to confirm its self-assessment, making a report and recommendation to the accrediting agency. Normally, these site visits are conducted on a ten-year cycle, and measure an institution's compliance with the agency's set of *criteria* or *standards,* which tend to be flexible enough for a variety of very different types of institutions to meet them.