INTRODUCTION

The aim in the following summary is to draw out the generic concerns of the participants rather than to identify the specific advantages and disadvantages of particular national or international systems. Inevitably, there will be some reference to particular example but these will be kept to a minimum.

THEME 1: Has external quality review had its day?

It has been suggested that external quality monitoring:

- leads to bureaucratisation and inflexibility;
- is incapable of asking the right questions and that 'visits' are amateurish and fail to observe what really goes on in higher education institutions;
- leads to 'game playing' and 'performance';
- has no real impact especially on student learning;
- leads to short-term response not permanent cultural changes;
- has a superficial impact on standards;
- is obsessed with accountability but should encourage internal quality improvement and external 'useful' information.

Discussion questions:

1. Does external monitoring inevitably lead to bureaucratic processes and ritualised responses?

2. Should external monitoring be permanent or short-term?

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1   External quality monitoring

External quality monitoring (EQM) includes accreditation (of institutions and programmes), institutional quality audit or assessment, programme assessment or review, external evaluation and comparison of standards, research reviews and assessment undertaken by bodies external to the institution, including government ministries, specially created agencies and professional bodies.

1.1   Internal-external

It was noted that, for many people working in higher education, external monitoring also includes 'internal-external', viz. any assessment, review or evaluation of departmental or discipline activities by others from outside the department or discipline area, which

might include such things as internal audits of procedures, monitoring of programme pass rates, and teaching evaluation done centrally or at faculty level.

2　Bureaucracy

It was felt that any form of external quality monitoring would involve some level of 'bureaucracy'. Bureaucracy refers to both the organisation of the external monitoring process and the process by which such monitoring takes place. The key issue is not so much the existence of a bureaucracy or of bureaucratic processes but the nature of the bureaucracy and its processes. External monitoring is not *per se* inherently faulty or oppressive. Each country must ensure its own balance between bureaucracy and development and must ensure it meets needs of external and internal stakeholders.

2.1　Quality bureaucracies

There was little discussion of the regulatory or statutory power, auspices and independence of quality monitoring bureaucracies. It was noted that such bureaucracies should, primarily, serve the stakeholders in higher education. It was proposed that quality monitoring bureaucracies should be flexible and enabling rather than controlling. Higher education institutions have changed and EQM bodies should also be prepared to adapt and be flexible.

Quality monitoring bureaucracies, it was suggested, have three main roles.

2.1.1　*Integrity*

First, to ensure the integrity of higher education — including international integrity — through something akin to an accreditation procedure. In many senses, the context and stage of development of higher education within any system is a key variable in the importance for an EQM system. The more new (private) development the more is the need for institutional accreditation. In the US, for example, institutional accreditation with established institutions is not providing much return on the monitoring process.

The presumption by governments and (their) agencies that integrity is maintained or assured by quality assessment or audit processes was not wholeheartedly endorsed. Many delegates were sceptical of controlling, accountability-oriented interventions by external agencies.

2.1.2　*Catalyst*

Second, there was a clear view that the primary purpose of quality monitoring bureaucracies should be to act as catalysts for internal improvement within institutions. This role requires dialogue and advice as part of the monitoring procedure and the renewal of a trusting relationship between external body and institutions. The emphasis on dialogue and support in EQM processes in Sweden was, for example, compared favourably to the British process.

In particular, there was scepticism that using particular performance indicators (such as retention) achieves real improvement. On the contrary, it encourages manipulation of data by institutions to meet targets. There was a preference for 'continuous improvement' and process-driven quality improvements. Such processes will, it was argued, generate their own performance indicators, which will be owned by institutions and will measure real improvement.

On a broader front it was argued that EQM should stimulate debate on what quality means in an era of mass higher education.

2.1.3 Conduit

Third, quality monitoring bureaucracies should act as conduits for information to various stakeholders, including prospective students, employers and funders. This information provision was the preferred form of any accountability role required of agencies (which some delegates considered inevitable).

However, it was suggested that information provided by quality monitoring bureaucracies should be 'qualitative' and informative rather than summative, quantitative evaluations of dubious statistical validity. In any event, there was a feeling that private agencies would produce league tables irrespective of any quality monitoring (see below, Theme 2).

It was argued, though, that quality monitoring is not necessarily the best way to provide the appropriate information. Research may provide much better analysis and more reliable information more cost effectively.

There was also an issue of what models underlay information provision — for example, there is a tendency to assume a consumerist model of learning (and hence implicit comparison of what students can expect) rather than a participatory model of learning (which requires information that enables students to identify what is best for their learning style).

3 Quality process

There was much more discussion about the 'bureaucratic process' of external quality monitoring than of the bureaucracies themselves. The discussion focussed on:
- the type of quality processes;
- self-assessment;
- the nature of the engagement with quality monitoring;
- the burden of external monitoring;
- the perceived legitimacy of the process;
- the effectiveness in encouraging improvement;
- the longevity of the process;
- the impact on learning;

- student feedback.

3.1 Type

There was some discussion about the focus of external monitoring: whether it should be at the programme, subject or institutional level. In the main, though, it was less the organisational focus that was of concern than the purpose of the activity.

The dominant approach is self-assessment followed by peer review supported by statistical data. This was not necessarily seen as the best approach. Many delegates were supportive of the Irish model which had three forms: a national five-year review based on self evaluation, active external examining and the appointment of international experts as supportive critical friends. The focus is on the learning environment rather than bureaucratic procedures.

3.2 Self-assessment

Many respondents reaffirmed the well-established anecdotal view that the main value of external monitoring is the internal self-reflection that it engenders. There is, though, a distinction that must be drawn between self-evaluation for internal use and self-evaluation for external consumption. Even at the early stages of the introduction of external monitoring this distinction is drawn, especially when the external evaluation is linked to accountability criteria — particularly any link , direct or indirect, to funding.

At worse, this leads to 'two sets of books' one for internal consumption and one, including required performance indicators, that is 'embellished' for external consumption. This embellishment appears to be irrespective of whether quality monitoring includes publication. This lack of openness is because universities fear revealing weaknesses or problems in self-evaluation because, in many countries, resources are used to reward strengths rather than combat weaknesses.

3.3 Engagement with the process

It was clear from the discussions that the nature of the engagement of institutions and academics with the external processes was heavily mediated by the perceived, short-term effect of the process. Dual 'self-evaluation' was indicative of this. There were many references to 'game playing' and compliance with external requirements and 'performance' to ensure maximum return from monitoring processes, whether it be financial rewards, allocation of extra student numbers, or safeguarding reputations.

It was suggested that this 'game playing' took many forms, some of which clearly obscured the reality of the situation. In some cases, for example, institutional managers went so far as requiring staff to present a particular image of the institution even when the staff were opposed to it or knew it to be a misrepresentation.

However, there was little evident surprise expressed that institutions and academics should 'play the game' for maximum effect: this was seen as a 'natural' outcome of accountability-oriented processes. The concern was that, in some systems, particularly 'mature' ones, that the game playing was taking up far too much time and resources for very little real return.

The British system, for example, may have initially encouraged better documentation but has now deteriorated into a compliance game in which many resources that could otherwise be used for improvement are being diverted to fulfil external monitoring requirements.

3.4   Burden

There was a concern expressed by those countries newly developing systems, such as South Africa and Australia, that the past experience of other countries indicates that institutions and academics would be faced by a heavy burden of extra work.

Delegates from countries with existing systems were of accord that monitoring processes, however benign, imposed an unnecessary bureaucratic burden. It was argued that, in some small countries, the process is excessive. For example, Denmark is a small homogenous society and higher education does not need heavy accountability machinery. Indeed, it was suggested that there is actually no need for explicit demonstrations of standards. However, it was also pointed out that countries to be satisfied that visiting students meet similar standards to their own.

A central feature of the excessive burden, was the time taken in preparing for monitoring events, in particular, the requirement to prepare specific event-related documentation. Rather than ask for specific documents, agencies should evaluate on the basis of what institutions already produce. If the evaluation, for example, reveals that the institution does not provide adequate material to students about assessment criteria, then this should be noted for future action. Requiring specially produced documents for reviews was considered bad enough but the expectation that academics should produce ongoing detailed documentation for monitoring purposes, such as required in the current British system, was seen as entirely unacceptable. Such activities divert scarce resources from the key tasks of higher education: viz., the improvement of the learning and experience for students and the development of research and scholarship.

3.5   Legitimacy

A key issue is the legitimacy of EQM systems and how far it is supported by academics.

It was considered important that monitoring processes should be collaborative. That the activity should not be one that is perceived as something being 'done to' an institution or department but one in which there is willing engagement with a view to making use of the process to help institutions, departments and individuals develop and improve their outputs: which may be enabling student learning, knowledge through research or

community involvement. As part of that, any external monitoring should include institutional and system-wide *interactive* debriefing — not just summary reports — as, for example, in the New Zealand system.

Academics, it was argued, consider some internal-external processes as credible and legitimate such as external examining and departmental reviews, which external monitoring should not displace.

It was noted that universities have very different attitudes to funding of research linked to external assessment compared with funding linked to evaluation of teaching. Research assessment is often perceived as somehow more legitimate. One explanation might be the greater the degree of difficulty (real or perceived) associated with measurement of teaching. However, many delegates were of the view that evaluation of teaching is a critically important objective of quality monitoring. Whether this is best achieved through internal processes, peer visits or professional inspection was a moot point.

In the end, to be legitimate, the purpose and goals of any external (or internal-external) monitoring need to be clear, Furthermore, external agencies should not adopt a policing role. Rather external processes should be supportive, aiding improvement in institutions and the system as a whole.

3.6   Impact on improvement

A major area of discussion was the effectiveness of quality monitoring in aiding and embedding improvement. A key issue was how to ensure that any results of external monitoring processes are not just temporary adjustments but result in lasting improvement. There is considerable evidence that the initial impact fades away quickly, especially if there is no significant connection between internal and external processes. External monitoring must interact with internal quality systems: the real benefits, it was argued, are products of the external-internal dialogue.

Thus, the issue was how to embed changes that may result from quality monitoring processes. Such embedding, it was generally acknowledged, involved changes in culture. Such changes do not occur quickly nor do they occur if the participants (students, staff, institutional leaders) are not committed to them. It was noted that there is a 'paranoia shift' amongst staff in higher education institutions from a fear of who will be targeted by external (or internal-external) processes to cynicism that nothing will happen.

If quality monitoring is seen as an 'event' rather than a 'process' there is little likelihood of the event making much long-term impact. Rather, it is likely to lead to performance and game playing. The more the process is one of complying with external requirements the less the lasting internal benefits. This whole process is exacerbated by links to funding.

It was argued that an inspection-based system, which threatens withdrawal of funding for underperformance, drives institutions to conceal weaknesses rather than engage in self-

evaluation and improvement. However, risk to funding, if used sparingly, *can* be effective in some circumstances. More effective, as discussed in Theme 2, is positive special-initiative funding if government is seeking compliance *and* ownership of change.

If quality monitoring is linked to funding, this can create tensions between rewarding success on the one hand and investing in institutions to support improvement. A good system will promote continuous improvement within the best institutions *and* within those that need to improve performance.

3.7   Longevity

It was pointed out that the nature and impact of quality monitoring may be different depending on whether the higher education system and quality assurance are at an early stage of development or well-established.

This led to the question of the longevity of external processes. To what extent do processes loose their improvement potential as they become more elaborate, make more demands, and become routinised?

As systems mature, there is the potential to emphasise procedural elements of quality rather than innovative process. The UK process, for example, was seen as an extreme approach that, apart from being extensive and very intrusive, was increasingly requiring documentation of every aspect of teaching to the detriment of the learning experience of students. While an 'event' is an unwelcome and 'unreal' intrusion, continuous monitoring by a controlling agency requiring 'overly bureaucratic procedures' will result in detailed paper trails but entirely stifle development and innovation. Leading to a continuous procedurising tendency and loss of academic autonomy.

There was a general feeling that, once external monitoring had started, monitoring should become less frequent. It was suggested that emphasis should be placed on interim internal monitoring, reports of which should go to the external agencies.

There is a need for constant reflection and change in EQM, but not to make it more intrusive and bureaucratic but the reverse, to give more trust to institutions and to work more collaboratively. This may require a periodic change in both purposes and in the agencies themselves.

The problem is that the bureaucracies become established and politicians are afraid of losing face if agencies are dissolved as this would appear to constitute an admission of failure. EQM risks becoming 'standardised', which may lead to excessive bureaucratisation and inflexibility. Without periodic change, there is the danger of ending up with a British-style, QAA-type, system: a rolling 'juggernaut', that is not sure what it is looking for, but which ensures compliance and minimizes innovation and risk-taking. British institutions continue to comply, even if the return on investment is derisory, because of the fear of loss of funding.

Increasingly, it was suggested, the monitors need monitoring.

3.8   Efficiency

Thus, overall, there were severe doubts expressed about the efficiency of most external quality monitoring. Apart from the excessive cost to the exchequer of external systems, the internal costs of monitoring, in some countries, are enormous and in no way reflect the value gained from the process.

Not only does external quality monitoring fail, in many systems, to engage with the internal improvement, its periodic and dramaturgical manifestations do not readily help inform change management in institutions.

Furthermore, there was concern that processes are incompatible with broader changes in higher education. Some delegates thought that external quality monitoring inhibits innovation through its conservative or rigid evaluation criteria. On the other hand, quality processes were seen as a vehicle for the introduction and implementation of government policy (discussed further in Theme 2).

3.9   Learning

Although it was felt that 'quality' could be a useful tool for the development of reflective practice in teaching, delegates were extremely sceptical that external quality monitoring had any impact on programme quality or student learning. There is no evidence of clear impact on learning and, indeed, available research suggests that other factors entirely outweigh the impact of external quality monitoring on student learning. The structure and organisation of external quality monitoring is not compatible with empowering staff and students to enhance the learning situation.

3.10 Student feedback

Student feedback is an important element of quality monitoring, especially if the emphasis is on internal processes. However, it is important that the feedback is linked to action and empowerment. Over-evaluation of students, unlinked to action, leads to 'questionnaire fatigue' and cynicism by both students and staff.

The point was made that, in the 1960s, student demanded that their perceptions were taken into account. In the current era there tends to be a need to extol students to provide feedback. Is was suggested that this is because student feedback has been 'hijacked' for other purposes. There is a need to ensure that students have ownership of feedback.

There is an incongruity about the engagement with feedback given that students are increasingly contributing to their higher education in most countries. Perhaps the problem is that, in view of this, too much emphasis is placed on a consumerist approach to

feedback rather than a participative approach. This may also be exacerbated by a seemingly instrumentalist approach by many students.