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Through Quality to Standards: the emergence of a fundamentally new , ‘expositional’, approach to standards from the infrastructural mechanisms for quality assurance recommended by the Dearing report.

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Abstract

The new method of external quality assurance for higher education in the UK represents a fundamentally new strategic approach which, at first glance, is concealed by various superficial similarities with previous methods of review. Hitherto external quality assurance had limited itself to judging the quality of programmes of study against the ends and standards that an institution had set itself. The new method uses the five elements of a ‘standards infrastructure’ — subject benchmarking, the qualifications frameworks, programme specifications, the Code of practice and progress files —to make explicit the standards already implicit in good academic practice. They make it possible to begin to establish an open, public discourse about higher education standards in which all parties share common, overt reference points, and in which non-academics are no longer marginalised. Thus, the new quality assurance method, far from involving increased external prescription (as some have claimed), is an attempt to identify, promote and make visible the largely covert standards embodied in academic practice.

Outline

Background

In the UK, a new method of external quality assurance for higher education is now being introduced. This differs in many respects from those which it replaces; but one difference is of central theoretical and practical importance. That is the fact that the new method sets out to base the judgements that it will make regarding standards and quality on shared, explicit standards reference points. Hitherto in the UK, external quality assurance had limited itself to judging the quality of programmes of study entirely against the ends and standards that an institution had set itself. Under previous arrangements it was not possible to examine whether these ends, and the standard associated with them were

make informed judgement about the relative merits, quality or standards of different institutions.

The QAA's new method for the assurance of academic quality and standards

Although considerable discussion has taken place about the QAA's new method for external quality and standards assurance (now being introduced), much of this has concentrated, perhaps understandably, on certain specific components of it, particularly on aspects of the new Academic Review process.

However, the new method, which has been greatly influenced by the views of the Dearing report and several of its specific recommendations, is much more than a new form of review, crucially important though that is. What it represents, I contend, is a fundamentally new strategic approach to quality assurance which, at first glance, is concealed by various superficial similarities with previous methods of review.

The standards infrastructure

The key to appreciating its novelty lies in recognising the fundamental importance to it of what has been called, the 'standards infrastructure'. That is to say, the five measures recommended by the Dearing and Garrick reports to provide, what the QAA describes as, 'reference points for standards'. These measures are, of course: subject benchmarking, the qualifications frameworks, programme specifications, the Code of practice and progress files. Each of these has now reached a advanced state of development.

The expositional approach to standards

The thesis of this paper is that these five elements, working in combination, introduce a radically new dimension into the assurance of quality and standards in higher education. They may be seen as providing a sketch of a new approach to these matters which I shall call 'expositional' or 'explicative'. In different ways and with different emphases, they provide, a series of mechanisms by which to make explicit the standards already implicit in good academic practice. They offer a means by which standards can be articulated (explicated) without being dominated by the internal values of the academic profession or the external values of outside constituencies (see Barblan, 1997).

They represent the polar opposite of externally-imposed 'prescriptive' approaches to standards. Thus, they make it possible, for the first time, to begin to establish an open, public discourse about higher education standards in which all parties share certain common, overt reference points, and in which non-academics are no longer marginalised and obliged to accept, on the basis of trust alone, the implicit, unexplicated standards of the academic experts.

Wider relevance to the accountability of professional practice

The implications of this approach are not simply restricted to higher education, they can be regarded as providing a new, generic perspective on a problem that arises repeatedly in the consideration of issues such as how best to increase the accountability of services, regulate professional practice and evaluate professional knowledge. That is, the problem

(1987, p.10) pointed out, 'professionalism breaks down the circle of accountability'. The paper recognises that both accountability and professionalism, or aspects of them, yield social benefits and are thus desirable features of contemporary developed societies. Both, it is argued, need to be preserved and reconciled. It is suggested that mechanisms such as those embodied in the Dearing report's infra-structural recommendations may offer a means by which this might be attempted.

The wider impact of an 'expositional' approach

The tasks of trying to capture the implicit and unspoken understandings of standards that are embedded in academic activity (and other forms of professional practice too) and to represent these in relatively unequivocal and accessible ways, is not simply an administrative process. It is a social process that begins to redefine and re-articulate the nature of professional expertise, and in doing so, the status and boundaries of professional knowledge. This process, I contend, by giving substance and clarity to standards (providing an exposition of them) makes them available for wider scrutiny, reflection, evaluation and debate. By doing this, the process of explication seems likely to enhance the standards it deals with, promote a more focused consideration of their nature and provide the basis for better-founded forms of self-regulation within the academic community.

I suggest that the development of the five infrastructural activities is not simply important for its direct and relatively immediate results (such as, benchmarking statements) but because it serves to embed the processes of articulating and explicating standards into new forms of social activity (such as, benchmarking groups), which will persist over the years and provide both an organisational basis and sustained dynamic for these processes.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that the new quality assurance method, far from involving increased external prescription (as some have claimed), is an ambitious attempt to identify, promote and make visible the hitherto largely covert and inaccessible standards embodied in academic practice. The new method is a way, that is, of giving voice to academic standards.

References:

- Barblan, A., 1997 'The CRE programme of institutional evaluation: issues encountered in the pilot phase, 1994-5' in Brennan, J., de Vries, P. & Williams, R., *Standards and Quality in Higher Education* (London, Jessica Kingsley).
- Day, P. & Klein, R., 1987, *Accountabilities: Five public services* (London, Tavistock).

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