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To What End? The Effectiveness of Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

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In this paper I argue that current systems of external quality assurance (QA) have been established to enable government to gain greater control over higher education institutions in an international policy context which now sees higher education as critical for national competitiveness. While governments have been willing to accommodate the higher education sector's wish for more focus on quality improvement (QI) through broader evaluation of university effectiveness within the systems of external QA that have been set in place, that has not been the policy driver. However, an issue which has received little attention is whether broadening the remit of national quality regimes is counter productive- actually working against improvements in teaching and learning.

The paper addresses three questions about the effectiveness of national systems of quality assurance in higher education

- Do they meet government requirements?
- Do they meet the higher education sector's aims?
- Do they improve the quality of student learning?

It will
- Suggest that control of universities is the one dominant intention in the establishment of national higher education quality assurance initiatives in those Anglophone countries where institutional autonomy has traditionally been considerable
- Argue this intention is mediated and reconstructed in a process of consultation and negotiation between government and higher education representatives.
- Call for more critical analysis of whether these reconstructed intentions, in teaching and learning at least, are being or can be achieved at the institutional level within the framework of external quality assurance

Why do governments initiate national quality assurance?

Over the last two decades we have seen great increases in the numbers participating in higher education with a move away from a system for the socially and economically privileged; a decrease in per capita funding in many Anglophone countries; a shift towards user pays; the incorporation into the concept of the modern university of a

much broader mission; and significant increases in the numbers of students taught by each member of academic staff. Enrolment of fee paying students from other countries has become a major source of income for institutions, regions and indeed whole countries. More recently, the critical role of universities in underpinning the innovation system as they generate new knowledge has begun to be recognised. Paradoxically as the percentage of the institution's income deriving from national or state governments has declined, the perceived importance to governments of higher education as an activity has grown and the desire to gain greater control over it has grown also.

While many activities are evaluated (Billing 2004) and many purposes are espoused in the quality assurance regimes now in place in Anglophone countries where traditionally there has been a great deal of institutional autonomy I agree with Vidovich who argues in her discussion of 'quality' policy in Australia that in such countries[1] these initiatives

> …*have been about raising the accountability of universities to governments that are claiming to be forging the 'national interest' in the global marketplace.* (Vidovich 2001, p.249)

The 'quality' literature (Billing 2004, Gordon 2002, Billing and Thomas 2000, El-Khawas 2001, Newton and Owen 1997) rarely challenges the reasons which governments have used to justify national quality regimes. It largely centres on implementation issues- the best way to establish and maintain such regimes. It is not often that the stated purposes themselves are challenged in the manner of Vidovich's trenchant analysis of the Australian discourse. In some of the more recent literature in the field, when the writer is critical (Harvey 2002, Biggs 2001, Newton, 2001), the major question is whether the regime leads to better outcomes- in particular better student learning.

In her analysis of the public discourse about quality initiatives in Australia Vidovich demonstrates how the various definitions of quality- standards, assurance, improvement, have been used to advance government control of universities. Discussions and contemporary debates within the higher education sector in Australia would support Vidovich's contention that greater control of the higher education sector was a major reason for the use of the quality discourse by government, an interpretation held elsewhere, as Newton's work (1999) in a Higher Education College in the UK suggests. There the academics had no doubt that the external QA initiatives with which they were working were led by accountability rather than improvement concerns. Harvey concludes

> *External quality monitoring is primarily to ensure accountability and conformity.* (2002, p.260)

Without any doubt the new national quality systems ensure that external scrutiny is brought to bear on institutions that have been largely closed to this form of public assessment. Until relatively recently peer assessment of the performance of individuals

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[1] In fact, she appears not to make the distinction I am making between countries where institutional autonomy has traditionally been high and those where the government has had a more direct role in institutional matters. However, Billing (2004) identifies this as a possibly significant difference in policy implementation at least and I have decided that it is wise to confine myself in this section of the paper to such countries.

and groups both within and among institutions has been the norm, based upon a shared commitment to academic autonomy. Vidovich (2001, p.260) would argue that the major intention of the QA policy initiatives of the last decade or more has been to establish greater control over the national system of   higher education. Harvey (2002, p.41) concurs, pointing to connections between what has happened in higher education and the characteristics of the 'new managerialism' with its development of pseudo markets, assessment of organisations' systems of control, action to steer at a distance and creation of experts whose knowledge is the basis of an audit regime. As Ramsden writes

> *In its journey from industry to universities, QA has metamorphosed from a practical way of achieving a better bottom line into a tool of control.* (2003, pp. 217-8.)

What is surprising is that there has been surprisingly little challenge in much of the formal academic literature to government initiatives to establish national QA systems. This may be because representatives of the higher education sector have found it hard to argue against 'quality' in any of its forms and, thus, have not spent much time challenging government's mandate or real intentions but rather, as El-Khawas (2001, p.113) says, put effort into the "...need to get it right".

I would suggest that for a decision to be made about the effectiveness of any national quality assurance regime the question about what purpose it is serving is central. In Australia, as in most other countries, much of the rhetoric is about improvement or enhancement of outcomes but I will argue later that if this is the intention then external quality assurance may not be the way to go. However, if the purpose is to demonstrate that there is an independent national system which reports publicly on whether institutions have systems to assure quality in place and can gauge the quality of their outcomes, then what is occurring in dozens of countries is acceptable and, indeed, the systems are effective in this. However, governments seek more.

There can be no argument that the last two decades of change in higher education in many countries - great increases in participation, greater diversity of entrants, decreased or stable per capita funding and institutional reshaping - have led to many questions. Everywhere both individuals and the media ask - Is this a proper university? Is this degree competitive? Are students being taught effectively? How do I know that this university is doing a good job?

In a globalising world where higher education has become a service industry, and some might argue a commodity, the answers to such questions for people trying to decide with which overseas university to study are possibly even more critical than they are to those who ask these questions with some local cultural context on which to base their interpretation of the answers. In my country the export category of Education Services now brings Australia more income than wool or wheat. In such circumstances there may well be a "…legitimate role[for] ..government in ensuring quality". (El-Khawas 2001, p.114). Certainly in debates about transnational delivery there has been real concern expressed in several countries about the activities of some providers affecting the reputation of all from that country and recently Garrett (2004), in a survey of transnational delivery by UK universities, suggests that an even tighter approach to quality assurance may be necessary to protect the UK 'brand'.

In summary then I would agree with Vidovich, Harvey and Ramsden that the aim of government in establishing national quality regimes is to gain greater control over the activities of higher education institutions. I believe that, in the process of establishment of such regimes, sector representatives seek to incorporate broader aims into the process of QA for complex purposes. In part, they wish to ensure that the richness and diversity of what universities do is incorporated into the ambit of the QA system but, too, they seek to subvert the government's desire for control.

It is not my intention in this paper to pursue the question of whether or not governments' desire for greater control is legitimate although, like Macintyre, I accept that

> *Quality assurance is an aspect of the mass system of higher education, a device for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of large, complex institutions that are vital to the nation's needs and in which government, business, professional associations and hundreds of thousands of domestic and international students have a keen interest.*
> (Macintyre 2004, p.21)

I now turn to the reasons why governments' desire for quality assurance leads to national QA regimes which address far more during audits than the question of whether institutions have acceptable systems in place to assure quality and are evaluating their outcomes.

Reshaping the agenda – what does higher education want?

National quality assurance regimes are generally underpinned by four components- an agency at arms length from government and institutions, self review by the auditee, institutional visits and a final report (El-Khawas 2001, p.111). The agency determines the evaluation criteria, framed by the ostensible purposes for which it has been established by government. Billing suggests, after interrogating a number of surveys of QA systems, that there is

> *…considerable commonality at the heart of national QA, in the shape of a spectrum from the 'softer' (developmental) improvement/informational functions to the 'harder' (judgemental) legal/financial/planning functions.* (Billing 2004, p.115)

How effectively these systems are actually operating at the 'softer' end or, more importantly, encouraging genuine innovation in institutions where there is a national QA system is not clear. What is evident, however, is that the more such national systems encompass, the more complex is the information you derive about individual institutions and the more difficult it is to compare their performance!

However, even if, as I have argued earlier, government's intention in all countries has been to gain greater control, the purposes espoused publicly by ministers have very commonly been about public accountability, the rights of consumers and assistance to

institutions in identification and dissemination of good practice. Quality improvement has been the rhetorical selling point. Within this elaborate charade, the higher education sector has been cooperative in working with government to develop methodologies which allow assessments with a QI focus. Of course, the development of a partnership between government and institutional representatives to make the experience of a QA visit useful for the institution visited seems, on the face of it, sensible. Much of the literature (for example Scott and Hawke 2003, Gordon 2002, El-Khawas 2001, Newton and Owen 1997) concentrates on the importance of such partnerships in meeting the 'softer' aims but little evidence is provided to support the argument[2]. Others (Harvey 2002, Newton 2002) have begun relatively recently to question whether these 'softer' aims can be met within an external system.

Sector representatives have sought to turn government intentions to control through operation of a relatively narrow conception of QA towards a regime which is more acceptable- more participatory, more connected to the broader and deeper purposes of education and more focussed on improvement rather than accountability. So they have wanted to move from QA to QI. If it has been inevitable that a national quality system will be introduced then sector representatives have sought something that might serve broader purposes.

Indeed, from personal experience, that was always the discussion in Australia. There was an acknowledgement that there was no convincing public argument which could be developed against the right of government to establish a more intrusive and direct involvement in assuring quality. The policy debate at senior level was about how to make the approach connect to what the sector thought was important.

In my country at least there was another issue on the table in the process which led to the establishment of the Australian University's Quality Agency (AUQA). There was real concern in higher education about the evident irritation of so many in politics (and indeed many in the community) with the complexity of the missions of universities and the real difficulties politicians and industry leaders have in identifying clearly and simply whether the institutions are successful in meeting the purposes for which they have been established. Politicians and business people like missions and plans which can be expressed in one or two pages - an impossible demand for universities with their complex missions of teaching, research and community engagement.

The perceived danger in Australia, and perhaps elsewhere, has been the possible direct translation into higher education of QA regimes from the business world with their emphasis on a small number of clear targets and an agreed bottom line where success or failure can be evaluated simply. The passion to identify a few robust performance indicators which would enable the Minister to gauge the success of the sector or compare the performance of institutions is, I understand, not unique to the Southern continent. Thus there have been some very good reasons, strategic and tactical, for sector

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[2] While it is never stated one must presume that these and other authors accept the right of government to establish such systems and seek to identify how the institution's internal needs for information about quality and performance can be met within the external system developed.

representatives to work with government to bring a broader perspective - Billing's 'softer' functions (Billings 2004, p.115), into the regimes as they have been established

The accommodation between government and higher education in most countries has been to negotiate the establishment of an external QA regime premised upon (El-Khawas 2001, p.113)

- Partnership between government and higher education
- Mutual respect
- The primacy of educational issues
- Participation of educational experts in decisions on educational issues

Why have the two players cooperated in this way? From the point of view of governments, cooption of potential opposition is always the easiest option in policy implementation. Without any doubt, implementation is less problematic with an assessment regime which will receive support, even if grudging, from sector leaders and which can be presented as offering benefits to the institutions.

For the sector and the individual institutions, there are complex reasons for working with such a regime. First, as I have suggested earlier, it's very difficult to run a public argument against 'quality'! Second, it may be that the external regime gives institutional managers a lever to address issues which have been hard to resolve in collegiate environments (Scott and Hawke 2003). Gordon 2002, Biggs 2001, Marginson and Considine 2000, Newton 1999 among many others, point to the growth of the power of executive leadership in modern universities and the decline of older concepts of collegial governance. My own experience of two quality regimes in my country has been that it has been easier as an academic manager to deal internally with controversial initiatives which touch upon issues of academic autonomy like compulsory evaluation of teaching with the threat of an external audit hanging over the institution.

Thus, from the point of view of sector leaders, the current national QA regimes with their mix of QA and QI functions are more palatable than simpler, statistically based QA approaches. They allow the complexity of institutional practice to be apparent and make broad comparisons between institutions very difficult. In circumstances where some form of external QA appears inevitable the forms in place at present appear to be effective from the perspective of the higher education sector. But, as Macintyre notes, institutional managers may pay a price for this accommodation with government and the leverage it gives to alter institutional practice.

> *Many of our colleagues experience these procedures as imposed, things that have to be done, outcomes that have to be reported, duties that are extrinsic to their academic vocation. So far from welcoming external quality audit as a chance to test and validate good practice, I suspect that many of our colleagues see it as increasing their burden.* (Macintyre 2004, p. 22)

However, my purpose here is not to discuss further the question of why sector and institutional leaders have cooperated with government in development of national QA

regimes but, rather, move to the possible impact on teaching and student learning outcomes of such regimes. It is, I believe, a question which has been under researched. In the next section I will attempt to address the question of whether, what ever the motivation for their establishment, external quality regimes can contribute to improvement of teaching and learning in the institution which is the focus of audit.

Is improvement in teaching and learning possible in external QA regimes?

Current, and probably converging (Billing 2004), models of government sanctioned quality assurance in higher education assure the public that an independent group is systematically addressing whether institutions meet what might be seen as minimum requirements but they don't address many of the deep issues about quality improvement which bedevil institutional leaders. With QA regimes in place in so many countries it is time to begin to look much more carefully at whether this now almost universal model of government sanctioned external assessment leads to better teaching and to improved learning outcomes.

Clearly there is diversity of view about the impact of external QA on teaching and learning in those universities which are subject to such regimes. These different views can probably be grouped into three categories. One group- largely external quality agency staff, institutional quality managers and some administrators would argue that an effective QA system identifies good practice and good outcomes and, if reports are properly disseminated, leads to wider improvement in practice. (Much of the publication in the 'quality' literature occupies this position.). A second group, largely administrators, would make more modest claims- it helps you to identify areas which are not performing and to take action to improve practice. (Many of the working papers from meetings of senior academics, rather than the formal literature would encompass this position.) A third group, largely those whose research has been concentrated on improving teaching and learning in universities would argue that external QA is not just ineffective, it may be counter productive in whole or in part (Ramsden 2003, Biggs 2001, Knight and Trowler 2000).

Increasingly I find myself slipping from the second to the third group. I wonder whether the external QA model with its powerful pressures to allow external scrutiny of the institution's management of this area and its outcomes actually hinders improvements in teaching and learning at the institutional level. These external pressures mean the institution acts to identify an acceptable institution wide model for 'delivery ' of teaching and evaluation of learning; to implement it; to collect comparable data across a often narrow set of indicators about the impact of teaching; and to reward good practice as the institution so defines it. What we are doing is systematising and perhaps even industrialising the processes of teaching and learning. With such an approach the dangers are that we alienate the teachers and encourage them to hide problems and innovate with great caution because innovation by its very nature means a great risk of failure. Indeed, I would go even further and venture that we know very little about the broad impact on student learning of existing internal institutional quality assurance

systems. While I believe we can be confident that they identify truly shocking practice we can't be sure they nurture good practice.

While I am not as convinced as some writers (Ramsden, 2003) that trust and collegial approaches are most of what we need to build effective teaching approaches in higher education I am quite clear that it is academics who innovate in teaching, not administrators, and that they will do that when they feel some sense of control over what they are doing, have time to think and reflect on what they have learnt from previous attempts to teach better and feel their efforts are valued. Internationally, all academics, however surveyed, now comment unfavourably on staff student ratios, the rising tide of administrative reporting and the loss of a sense of control over their work. In my country this larger context of concern about whether the job is doable in the current conditions has not been raised as a system issue by the national audit body but rather, raised in audit reports as an institutional management issue.

My concerns are shared by a number of people whose major area of research and scholarship is effective teaching in higher education. Each is writing from the perspective of experience in the culture of higher education and concern about, in particular, the impact on student learning of such interventions. Their concerns mirror ones I have as an institutional leader. These writers appear to have few doubts that such systems fail to lead to real improvement in approaches to teaching and to student learning.

> *Quality assurance in universities has more of the characteristics of administrative burden than an exciting intellectual journey….It badgers teachers rather than working alongside them….these characteristics seem to be present whether an intensive subject inspection system or a 'lighter touch' of periodic institutional audit is employed. The variation is in degree rather than character.* (Ramsden 2003, p. 218.)

Ramsden is not a supporter of the kinds of QA now in place in so many countries. He argues that they encourage compliance and not commitment, reinforce unsophisticated theories of learning and engender a culture of lack of trust of academics. Such views about the effects of external QA are shared by Knight and Trowler who are critical of Ramsden's views about effective academic leadership but, like him, warn that attempts to improve the practice of teaching in universities by coercive approaches will fail.   If that is so, who is researching the impact of external QA on teaching and learning outcomes in universities? Isn't it time for the 'quality' literature to make some connections with the literature on teaching and learning in universities? There is a very large area of enquiry about effectiveness to be addressed.

While a brief survey of the 'quality' literature suggests that a relatively small group of researchers is now beginning to question whether the intentions, at least in relation to teaching and learning, of most audit regimes are achievable (Harvey 2002, Gosling and D'Andrea 2001) the bulk of it is horrifying in its lack of analysis. It is largely descriptive and superficial. It describes methodologies, rarely asks questions about implicit intentions and largely accepts espoused purposes of governments uncritically. One could be charitable to those who publish in the 'quality' literature and say of them that they are effective in describing how to implement quality assurance within prevailing models. But

I believe they would claim they are doing more than that. Perhaps it is time for them to heed Macintyre's warning to institutional managers

> *Our life consists of management tasks, formulating strategies and reporting outcomes, reconciling ends and means, encouraging good practice and dealing with the consequences of bad. We share a bureaucratic rationality which has quality as one of its guiding values. Our greatest challenge is to persuade the sceptics that we are doing something useful, something which helps them do their jobs.* (Macintyre 2004, p.25)

Conclusion

The impact of regimes of quality assurance on the outcomes of higher education has been the subject of remarkably little critical analysis. It seems that 'quality' practitioners and theorists have spent little time challenging, analysing and evaluating what is happening. A brief survey of the literature in the major journals in the field suggests that this concentrates on how and what to do in implementing a QA system nationally or institutionally. There is little evidence that those whose careers are built around implementation of these quality systems have yet developed a professional discourse which leads to sustained and searching questioning of whether what they do is worth doing in the first place or if it leads to better outcomes in, for example, student learning.

There appear to be at least three useful lines of enquiry. First, what are the implicit rather than explicit aims of national systems of QA? Second, what are the processes of construction and reconstruction of the quality agenda nationally and institutionally? Finally and most importantly, what is the medium to long term impact on academic work, quality of teaching and outcomes of student learning of greater external monitoring and control of the teaching and learning environment?

The answers from research which pursues these three lines of enquiry may be irritating to governments which provide the funds to the quality industry; critical of institutional managers who have used external QA as a means of implementing stronger internal controls; and provide support for academics' arguments that more rather than less direct control of the teaching and learning environment is conducive to good student learning outcomes. But if we argue that the quality cycle requires us to plan, implement, evaluate and improve then it is critical that rigorous, searching evaluation of the effectiveness of national quality systems is undertaken. It is time to move from description to analysis.

When I advocate such evaluation I am not suggesting that form of evaluation funded by governments which seeks to frame the questions in order to get the answers they want in order to preserve a system of control. It must be dispassionate academic enquiry that seeks the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be to us all – academic leaders, quality agencies and governments.

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