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# Quality assurance in UK higher education

*John Brennan and Laura Bellingham*

## **Some history**

As in other countries, new arrangements for evaluation and quality assurance came with the expansion of higher education in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the British case, relatively high degrees of institutional autonomy of universities have meant that the introduction of quality assurance has not been without controversy. It was not replacing direct forms of state control with something else. Rather it was seen as infringing longstanding freedoms and independence. It was not surprising, therefore, to find the first establishment of a national quality assurance agency focused exclusively on the fast-growing polytechnic and college sector over the period from the late 1960s up until the early 1990s. The remit of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was to ensure comparability of degree standards in the new polytechnics with those in the universities. The CNAA was created by government but was operationally independent of it. The CNAA 'validated' polytechnic courses using a system of subject-based peer review centred around periodic institutional 'visits'; it appointed external examiners to courses following well-established university principles; and finally, it awarded CNAA degrees to successful students in the polytechnics and higher education colleges. Decisions of the CNAA were mainly made by 'subject boards' consisting of academics drawn from the staffs of both polytechnics and universities, though there was also an 'institutional review' procedure which examined the institution's internal procedures for quality and standards over the periods between the quinquennial course-based validation visits by the CNAA subject boards.

The CNAA system meant that ultimate responsibilities for quality lay, initially at least, outside the institutions themselves. But over time, the CNAA faced and responded to institutional pressures for greater autonomy and control over their own practices, reflecting their growing experience and maturity, with the delegation of areas of authority to the institutional level. This began a gradual process of the transfer of power from external subject-based academics to internal institutional managers.

Other features of the CNAA system (which ran for over 20 years, longer than any successor quality assurance body in the UK) lay in the emphasis on threshold standards and the absence of published reports on the results of evaluation processes. Thus, the CNAA did not provide information that could be used to make comparisons between courses or institutions. Though its reports, especially critical ones, could sometimes lead to drastic internal changes within institutions.

Though one of the first European countries to establish a strong binary system of higher education, the UK was one of the first countries to discard it. In 1992, all of the polytechnics together with a proportion of higher education colleges were given university status and the degree-awarding powers, which went with that status. Accordingly, the CNAA was closed down.

While the concept and organisational form of quality assurance in higher education came initially to the UK through the CNAA, there is sense in which the CNAA's role in relation to the polytechnics was nothing new to UK higher education. The vast majority of the universities started life as colleges or other institutions and only after a significant period of time acquired their own university status and title, together with the degree awarding powers and other areas of authority that went with them. Prior to this, they served a period of 'apprenticeship' where quality and standards of their courses and awards were the responsibility of existing established universities. Thus, as with the CNAA and the polytechnics, quality assurance and evaluation was part of a developmental process through which the institutions acquired the authority and credibility to take responsibility for their own quality and standards. But at the end of the process, there was 'freedom' and independence. This arguably is what

has been challenged by the quality assurance and evaluation systems established in the UK over the last 20 years.

However, even before the end of the 1980s, inroads were being made to the traditional independence of higher education institutions. Towards the end of the decade, a system of government inspection – based on processes operated at other levels of education – had been introduced in the polytechnics and this paralleled the CNAAs processes. Also in that decade, formal evaluation of higher education research was introduced with the Research Assessment Exercises. The latter entailed published ratings of research quality and had significant financial consequences for universities through their grant allocations for research. And finally, fearing the imminent arrival of a state-controlled evaluation system, the universities themselves collectively – through the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (the then representative body of university leaders) – established an Academic Audit Unit (AAU). The operation of the AAU was predicated on the assumption that authority over quality and standards remained with individual universities. The AAU provided a support role, offering public assurance that effective university evaluation processes existed and were working effectively. There was though also an important ‘defence role’ in the work of the AAU, attempting to ‘protect’ universities from the introduction of regulatory processes controlled from outside.

An adaptation of the famous ‘triangle of co-ordination’ developed by Burton Clark would have ‘institutions’, ‘academics’ and the ‘state’ at its three corners. In comparison with other European countries, UK higher education has traditionally lain at the institutional corner. Arguably, this remains relatively true today but it is contested territory with higher education institutions increasingly expected to adapt and respond to a changing mix of both regulatory and market mechanisms.

### **The ‘quality wars’**

The phrase was David Dill’s, professor of public policy at the University of North Carolina, writing about the debates and developments in evaluation within UK higher education. The new ‘unitary’ system of higher education introduced in 1992 converted a lot of polytechnics into universities, though viewed from some perspectives the new arrangements effectively converted universities into polytechnics. The new arrangements brought with them external controls of kinds with which the polytechnics had long been familiar and extended them to the whole of the higher education system. The Research Assessment Exercises embraced the whole of the system. Educational quality was partially controlled through a Higher Education Quality Council, successor to the Academic Audit Unit, owned collectively by the institutions and operating a system of institutional audits of their own internal evaluation and quality assurance processes. But alongside this, institutions also experienced periodic inspections of their teaching quality, organised by the higher education funding councils for the constituent nations of the UK, and which consisted of subject-focused peer review visits to institutions. Unlike the peer review visits of the CNAAs, the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) visits included classroom observation of teaching and graded outcomes of teaching quality, which were published following the visits. The TQA processes and the academic peers who participated in them were also ‘managed’ and ‘trained’ in ways that the more collegial traditions of the CNAAs had not allowed.

The new arrangements (with Teaching Quality Assessment rechristened as Subject Review) lasted only a few years. They faced some strong opposition from the universities. They were seen as threatening their autonomy, consuming a lot of resource, and bringing considerable reputational risk (that could arise from a particularly damaging review report). It must also be recognised, however, that for some institutions they could also bring reputational gain when a subject in a less prestigious institution was highly rated by the external reviewers. The parallel processes of subject review and institutional audit reflected to some degree a clash of powers between the state-sponsored higher education funding councils and the institutionally-sponsored Higher Education Quality Council. In many ways, it was seen by some as a ‘war’ about power as much as it was a ‘war’ about process. Subject review could, in many institutions, lead to useful evaluations of and improvements to current

practices. It could disseminate good practice between institutions. And it went some way towards acting as a corrective to an excessive emphasis on research within institutions produced by the regular research assessment exercises. Subject review was a sign, at least for some, that teaching students was an important function of higher education institutions!

Eventually, however, the parallel processes of subject review and institutional audit were brought together through the creation of a Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the subject reviews were gradually phased out for most institutions. The QAA inherited much of the experience and relationships of the HEQC and, to that extent, 'belonged' to the institutions. However, overarching responsibility for quality rested with the higher education funding councils who effectively delegated some of it to the QAA. But some important processes were not delegated. The RAE remained with the funding councils. And a new National Student Survey was producing institutional ratings based on measures of student satisfaction. Both the RAE and the NSS have become increasingly important in creating and legitimising an increasingly hierarchical system of higher education, irrespective of whether or not that was their original stated intention.

### **Differentiating and regulating a mass system of higher education**

Several authors have contrasted 'horizontal' and 'vertical' forms of higher education differentiation (e.g. Clark, Teichler). The former emphasise functional differences while the latter proclaim reputational and status differences. Institutions are seen to be not only, or necessarily, different from each other but some are regarded as being 'better' than others. In Trow's terms, all of this was necessary if a mass system of higher education was to be also able to perform elite functions. Thus, data that could be used to make comparisons between institutions became particularly valuable. And obtaining good 'scores' in the relevant measures of quality became increasingly important drivers of activity within institutions, reflecting increasing institutional competitiveness in an increasingly vertically differentiated higher education system. Today, it is not unusual to find university strategic objectives presented in forms such as 'becoming a top 50 (or top 100) institution' in one of the several league tables that hit the newspapers with seemingly ever increasing regularity. And the 'performance' of individuals and units within institutions comes to be increasingly assessed in relation to its impact on institutional 'performance'.

In line with government policies more generally, quality in higher education is seen as requiring market conditions in order to flourish. For market conditions to pertain, consumers and potential consumers need to be given information on which to make decisions, about what and where to study. It might be noted in this respect that traditions in England at least have been about 'going away' to university rather than attending the local institution. Thus, difficult choices have to be made and reputational hierarchies become heavily shaped by (but also reflect) consumer demand. In a way, this is all part of the larger neo-liberal agenda of marketization and managerialism, opposed by some but accepted as an increasing 'fact of life' for many. The principal review method for institutions in England introduced for the current academic year<sup>1</sup> will include, for the first time, a judgement on the information that institutions make available to current and prospective students from 2012-13. Potential applicants require clear and reliable information on which to base their choices in order for the market place to function effectively, according to the prevailing rhetoric.

In this context, current debates about evaluation and quality assurance of the teaching function of higher education institutions seem often to be about markets, about how to support and inform them, but also about how to regulate and control them. To the three key players in our modified version of Clark's triangle (the state, the institutions and the academic profession) have to be added the students, or in Clark's original formulation, the market. Students are seen as key consumers and beneficiaries of higher education and therefore properly central to questions about quality and standards. The current method of institutional review in England places a greater emphasis on students' feedback than before

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<sup>1</sup> This process replaces the Institutional audit process that ran from 2006-7 to 2010-11.

– reviewers meet a greater number of students, engage in more detailed discussion with them and explore their evidence in greater depth than before. Institutions are expected to show how students have been involved in the preparation of their action plans following the review visit. In the UK, student members of review teams had already been introduced and this practice will continue.

Institutional review is not all about assurance however. The method in all parts of the UK includes an ‘enhancement’ part alongside the assurance element. In England, the new method focuses on a particular theme each year, which will allow the QAA, funders and representative bodies to assess the ‘state of the nation’ across all institutions. For the current academic year, the theme is the first year student experience. Having some in-built flexibility to the method is intended to allow the higher education sector to respond to external influences, including the public interest. In a similar vein, the reports from each review, which are made public on the QAA website, will feature a summary of findings aimed specifically at an audience outside of the institution itself. In the current climate this is presumed to be students and their parents who are set to pay considerably higher fees than in previous years and who are expected to show a greater interest in the quality of the educational experience on offer and the ‘value for money’ their investment is likely to represent.

In the discussion above, it was noted that engaging in external quality review can bring benefits to the institution. The preparation of the ‘self-evaluation document’ by the institution, which was a core part of the former review method and which will remain in the current method, presents an opportunity for critical self-reflection on methods and progress. Not all institutions have approached this part of the review in the same way however. The new review method will include improved guidance on how to prepare the self-evaluation document, which will encourage institutions to be more reflective, analytical and self-evaluative, identifying successes and areas for improvement within their own operational context.

While responsibility for academic quality and standards remains firmly with individual institutions that hold degree awarding powers, the external scrutiny of the ways in which they discharge their responsibility, carried out by the QAA, will result in a clearer, more explicit judgement as from the current academic year. The judgement will say whether threshold standards ‘meet UK expectations for threshold standards’ or ‘do not meet UK expectations for threshold standards’. Quality will be judged as ‘commendable’, ‘meeting UK expectations’, ‘requiring improvement to meet UK expectations’ or ‘does not meet UK expectations’. These judgements, while not resulting in numerical scores that can be used for ranking, will allow for direct and straightforward comparison to be made between different institutions to assess which have met (or exceeded) the requirements and which have not.

An increasing number of private providers of higher education – those that do not receive direct state funding – are also applying for degree awarding powers and several subscribe voluntarily to the QAA for external review<sup>2</sup>. This reflects the ever-increasing diversity of provision for higher education in the UK and the aspiration of Government and others to create a ‘level-playing field’ for providers and students alike, for whom there may be benefits deriving from a greater choice of what, where and how to study.

The QAA is also making attempts to reduce the administrative burden involved in preparing for an external review. Teams can submit evidence electronically and both parties will be expected to use video and teleconferencing facilities where available to cut down on meeting time and cost. (It can still be argued however that the burden is in the preparation of the evidence in the first place!). Government too has an interest in rationalising regulation and reducing the burden. Very close to the time of writing, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has begun a period of consultation on further changes to the review method that will take an increasingly ‘risk-based’ approach. The detail has yet to be established but the principles underlying the theory will be that institutions with a strong and reliable track record will be reviewed less frequently and/or less

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<sup>2</sup> A large number are also engaged in the process known as Educational Oversight by the QAA as part of a necessary requirement to be able to recruit international students in line with new visa regulations in the UK

intensively than those who are new to the field or do not have a strong track record. The measures that will be used to determine which institutions are a greater risk or, put another way, which pose a greater risk to the standards of the degrees they award and the quality of the educational experience they offer is likely to be the topic of much debate in the coming months. Students and their feedback are likely to be given some emphasis in the new approach, within the context of the additional factors that might trigger external scrutiny or intervention.

Turning to the research function of higher education, it is here that we continue to see the major emphasis on rankings and league tables, though the basis of these may be changing to some extent. A Research Excellence Framework (REF) is replacing the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The first REF exercise is due to be completed (with the publication of outcomes) in December 2014. While the full details of the new methodology are still not completely clear and are likely to differ to a degree between different subject areas, the main changes from the RAE appear to be about the greater use of various output metrics together with a lessening of the administrative load of the exercise and a greater attention to the 'impact' of research.

The REF, according to HEFCE, will focus on three elements, which together reflect the key characteristics of research excellence. These are a) outputs, where the quality of published work will be assessed through a process of peer review, informed by citation information in subjects where robust data are available (for example, in medicine and science), b) impact – in terms of demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life. Impacts will be assessed through a case-study approach. Finally, c) environment - the REF will take into account the quality of the institutional research environment in supporting a continual flow of excellent research and its effective dissemination and application.

It has been the inclusion of the element of research 'impact' which has been subject of controversy since the publication of the plans for the REF. According to the HEFCE official website, the REF aims at the identification and reward of the impact that excellent research has had on society and the economy. A pilot exercise that ran during 2010 aimed to test the feasibility of assessing research impact. According to the report of the pilot exercise, the conclusion was that it is possible to assess impacts arising from research in the disciplines approached - Clinical Medicine, Physics, Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences, Social Work and Social Policy, English Language and Literature. One key finding related to the variety of impacts: "HEIs in the pilot provided evidence of a wide variety of impacts arising from their research. This provided a unique collection of evidence that made explicit the social and economic benefits of research from each of these disciplines" (HEFCE, 2010, p. 2).

In March 2011 the funding bodies announced their decisions on the weighting and assessment of impact within the RAE. They decided, in line with the key findings mentioned above, that:

- a) "In the REF there will be an explicit element to assess the 'impact' arising from excellent research, alongside the 'outputs' and 'environment' elements.
- b) The assessment of impact will be based on expert review of case studies submitted by higher education institutions. (...)
- c) A weighting of 25 per cent for impact would give recognition to the economic and social benefits of excellent research. However, given that the impact assessment in the 2014 REF will still be developmental, the weighting of impact in the first exercise will be reduced to 20 per cent, with the intention of increasing in subsequent exercises.
- d) The assessment of research outputs will account for 65 per cent, and environment will account for 15 per cent, of the overall assessment outcomes in the 2014 REF. These weighting will apply to all units of assessment".  
(Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2011)

Thus, assessments of research according to the above criteria will be the basis of both funding and reputational differentiation of UK higher education after 2014 with consequences both for individual

institutions and the academics working within them. It remains to be seen whether the new methodology for assessing the quality of research will alter the results of the assessments, either in terms of the positions within the rankings or in the institutional behaviours produced in response to them. What is clear, however, is that it will be the results of the assessment of research rather than of education that will remain the principal means of differentiating institutions and providing a reputational hierarchy.

## Conclusions

Over the years, quality assurance in UK higher education has expected different things of different people with different consequences flowing from compliance or non-compliance with externally-set rules and expectations. The extent to which this has led to real changes in the core functions of institutions is an arguable point, with different voices seeing 'improvements', 'damage' or just 'mere compliance'. Part of the answer may be that it has had different consequences in different places. And while the quality assurance processes connected to the teaching activities of higher education have mainly been about ensuring common and comparable standards, processes connected with research have been mainly about differentiation and the construction of hierarchy. It is perhaps ironic, if not surprising, that a research-based hierarchy of institutions becomes a major factor in student choices of where to study.

Partly reflecting the shift in the balance of funding of higher education from the state to the student, the debates about quality of teaching have been set within increasingly 'marketised' and 'consumerist' language. The implications for institutions are regarded as largely coming from market decisions, which may be influenced by quality assurance outcomes, rather than from decisions made (and powers exercised) by the quality agency or funding council. Will students want to enrol? Will employers want to recruit the graduates? Such questions reflect a growing emphasis on higher education as a private rather than a public good, of value to those who participate in it directly and who are socially and economically advantaged as a consequence. At the same time, however, calls can be heard for more attention to be given to the wider 'public goods' that flow from higher education, to the social as well as the economic impacts that are needed and can be obtained from a 'high quality' higher education system.

Questions of 'who benefits?' also lie at the heart of the changes being made to the assessment of research in UK higher education with greater attention being given to the economic and social 'impacts' of research. And once again there is a central political issue related to the beneficiaries of publicly funded institutions of higher education. One of the difficulties of assessing benefit, of both education and research, lies in the limited time frames available and the inevitable danger of taking only short-term perspectives. However, the assessment of such benefits presents a major challenge to both institutions and to quality agencies such as the QAA and funding bodies such as the HEFCE. Yet ultimately, the continuation of at least some elements of public funding of higher education requires that these challenges be met.

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