Twenty years of trying to make sense of quality assurance: the misalignment of quality assurance with institutional quality frameworks and quality culture

Abstract
This paper critiques two decades of the quality assurance movement in higher education, based on 400 articles published in the international journal *Quality in Higher Education*. It reveals, first, that there has been little theorising of quality and of quality assurance. Second, that quality as applied to higher education is not necessarily coincident with the operation of quality assurance processes. Third, there has been considerable confusion of the notions of ‘quality’, ‘standards’ and ‘quality standards’. Fourth, quality assurance is notable for a lack of trust. Fifth, there is a preoccupation with expensive bureaucratic procedures albeit they have ensured a degree of transparency. Sixth, there has been a general failure to align quality assurance processes with the improvement of student learning. These conclusions reflect the disinclination of quality assurance to confront the nature of student learning. In short, quality assurance has failed to align quality culture with academic culture.

Introduction
This paper critiques two decades of the quality assurance movement in higher education. The empirical base for the analysis is 400 articles published in the international journal *Quality in Higher Education* since its inception in 1995 (Harvey and Williams, 2010a, 2010b). To this is added reviews and reflection on twenty years of the quality movement. This analysis shows the following. First, there has been a paucity of theorising of quality and of quality assurance. Second, the concept of quality as applied to higher education is not aligned with the operation of quality assurance processes. Third, until recently, the notions of ‘quality’, ‘standards’ and ‘quality standards’ have been confounded. Fourth, quality assurance is notable for bearing the hallmark of managerialism and an associated lack of trust of the academy, arguably resulting in the mania for accreditation. Fifth, there has been a preoccupation with ensuring explicit codified bureaucratic procedures, which have ensured transparency but have been expensive. Sixth, quality assurance processes have had very little impact on the improvement of student learning. Instead, quality assurance repeats the mantra that improving ‘standards’ (albeit poorly defined) would somehow indicate an improvement in the pedagogic process.
These conclusions reflect the disinclination of quality assurance to confront the nature of student learning, reflected in the predominant use, by most external quality agencies, of a fitness-for-purpose definition of quality that by-passes the need to confront the essential nature of higher education learning, or the use of an excellence notion of research that also disavows essentialism. In short, twenty years of quality assurance has seen the systematic misalignment of quality culture and academic culture.

Furthermore, the situation is getting worse (with notable exceptions, such as Scotland) and the same issues that arose twenty years ago are being ‘reinvented’. Unlike most academic disciplines that learn from accumulated knowledge and experience, quality assurance, it seems, systematically disavows all that has come before. This is, in no small part, because quality assurance is not a discipline, despite the hopes of some who argue for the professionalisation of the occupation (Roznayi, 2010), and is regularly ‘invaded’ by opportunistic politicians whose field of vision is restricted to the next election.

That as it may be, what has the analysis of contributions to the leading journal on quality in higher education shown and what have eminent commentators, long involved with quality assurance, had to say about the last twenty years? In short, the answer is that quality assurance has promised a lot, cost even more and delivered little. More could have been done with the resources expended on the various layers of quality assurance. From the outset, buoyed by an inherent distrust of the academy (a distrust subsequently returned by the higher education institutions), quality assurance has focused on procedures rather than on the intrinsic nature of the higher education enterprise. Many such procedures operate at a level distanced from the practice of learning and teaching, or of research, and primarily engage senior managers or centralised ‘quality assurance’ units in periodic, often set-piece encounters. The few that have attempted a much more direct engagement in assessing the learning process have retreated in the face of hostility, such as the English quality assessment that included direct observation of teaching by, unfortunately, untrained peers.

Newton (2010) sums up the ‘quality revolution’ with a quote from Dickens’ ([1955]). *Tale of Two Cities*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
We had everything before us, we had nothing before us,
We are all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...

Saarinen (2010) says that, of course, the quality revolution (Newton 2002) was not really a revolution:
If by revolution we mean something that takes place intrinsically, bottom up. It is difficult to imagine the academic community rushing to barricades to demand European-wide quality assurance techniques or national, funding-related accountability schemes (Saarinen & Välimaa 2010). This was a revolution of the administration and the policy makers, and—as it seems—something the academic community reacted to, rather than acted to achieve.

Theorising
In a journal devoted to quality in higher education, it might be expected that a number of the contributions focus on quality as a concept, although few of the 400 contributions have done so. Harvey (1995) in the opening editorial set out different concepts of quality and standards; a structure developed from the extensively referenced analysis in ‘Defining Quality’ (Harvey and Green, 1993), which examined five definitions. Lomas (2002) observed that research with a sample of senior managers in higher education institutions in the UK revealed that of the five definitions, fitness for purpose and transformation were the two most appropriate definitions but that measuring quality as transformation has led to difficulties in its practical application. Melrose (1998) identified three paradigms of curriculum evaluation and described them as functional (technical), transactional (naturalistic) and critical (emancipatory) and suggested a link between different concepts of quality and the paradigms of curriculum evaluation that influence the evaluative operations of academics. Tam (2001) observed that ‘quality’ is a highly contested concept and has multiple meanings linked to how higher education is perceived. She suggested various models of measuring quality including the simple ‘production model’, which depicts a direct relationship between inputs and outputs; the ‘value-added approach’, which measures the gain by students before and after they receive higher education; and the ‘total quality experience approach’, which aims to capture the entire learning experience undergone by students during their years in universities or colleges.
Others have warned about colonisation of concepts. Lemaitre (2002) argued that globalisation has become a new way of describing the imposition of cultural, political and economic priorities formerly associated with imperialism. One needed to be aware of the impact on developing countries of importing quality concepts from more developed countries. A view echoed by Idrus (2003) who argued that quality has some formidable obstacles to acceptance in developing countries.

More recently, Iacovidou, Gibbs and Zopiatis (2009) reported a staff and student-led approach to understanding quality. This different focus indicated a mismatch in student and teaching staff perceptions regarding the importance of factors in what constituted quality higher education provision. The key differences were that students considered the programmes and courses of study offered by a higher education institution and the teaching and learning that takes place in the institution as the most important dimensions of quality higher education provision. Teaching staff, though, considered the student support services, the teaching and learning facilities and student examination and assessment as the most important dimensions.

These various contributions point to three things; that analysis of quality should not be detached from purpose and context; that quality has political dimensions and is about more than satisfaction; and that to be meaningful it needs to relate to the specifics of the educational experience.

Quality and quality assurance
However, most external agencies have been happy not to develop any serious analysis of the intrinsic quality and have settled for the fatuous ‘fitness for purpose’ approach to defining quality. This is not really a definition but simply an avoidance technique. It reflects a lack of alignment of the concept of quality as applied to higher education and the operation of quality assurance processes. As Fornari and Pompilli, (2008) point out, the vagueness of the term ‘purpose’ can reconcile a range of interests and thus the underlying objectives that are often in opposition to each other. Further, the efforts of Italian universities to develop quality assurance appear: flawed by the reductionism inherent in the definition of objectives and by the weakness of the universities’ cultural project. It is translated into a strict operation of deconstruction of the concept of quality into objectives and sub-objectives (as also required by the models used) that allow monitoring processes but do not introduce change. As other research has shown, this is an approach that lacks a real discussion about the purposes…and where
quality assurance appears as an ‘add-on’ or as a part of a compliance culture (Newton, 2008). (Pompilli, 2010)

Fitness for purpose pretends to offer a flexible approach in which assessments of quality are matched against institutional mission. This is flimsy and a close look at the approach adopted by external agencies reveals that there is an implicit set of criteria that are applied irrespective of mission. In South Africa, for example, this has been explicitly stated by adding fitness of purpose to the fitness-for-purpose approach, thus constraining missions (Singh et al., 2004).

What the published articles clearly show is that ‘quality’ is not about the intrinsic quality of learning or of research but is shorthand for the processes by which this undefined concept is assured. The result is that quality assurance fails to integrate with the conceptualisation of the quality of the work of students, teacher and researchers.

**Quality, standards and quality standards**

Third, until recently, the notions of ‘quality’, ‘standards’ and ‘quality standards’ have frequently been confounded. This reflects displacement of ‘quality’ to ‘quality assurance’ and the consequent attempts to shortcut quality by focusing on standards (of outcomes or service) on the one hand or by specifying quality standards, such as the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG) on the other. There is no space to explore this in detail here (see Harvey 2006). Suffice to say that as distrust grows, less emphasis is placed on the nature of learning and more on instrumental outcomes, not least those linked to economic policy.

**Managerialism, distrust and accreditation**

Fourth, quality assurance processes have been predominantly managerialist and characterised by a lack of trust of the academy. Saarinen (2010) analysing the discourse about higher education quality has shown how the metaphor of fragility was used in the 1990s, which by the turn of the Millennium had constructed quality assurance as a ‘force-of-nature movement, as irresistible and inevitable’. Throughout, ‘the dominant values seem to have been those of control, competition, and regulation’.

Baldwin (1997) looked at how the short-lived national quality assurance system of the early 1990s in Australia impacted on Monash University. While there were some positives, a key downside was
the perceived de-professionalisation of academic staff, associated with a policing mentality and a lack of trust.

Meade and Woodhouse (2000) optimistically argued that a review of the New Zealand Academic Audit Unit suggested that trust and mutual respect has been established with promising signs that universities are beyond compliance. Leeuw (2002), though, examined the inspectorate process in 14 European countries and argued that reciprocity between inspectors and institutions is important because it reduced the potential for dissembling and game playing because inspectees would lose credibility as trustworthy partners in the evaluation. However, only a minority of agencies involved in a reciprocal trusting relationship with their inspectees. More recently, Cheng (2009) revealed that English academics' professionalism resulted in a tension between professional values and quality audit because the perceived bureaucracy of the audit, its time cost, represented a symbol of distrust in the professionalism of academics. Similarly, Gibbs (2009) concluded that, ultimately, quality should be part of everyday practice, which requires trusting the expertise of academics and not using assurance precepts to control activities.

It is arguable, although space precludes a detailed analysis, that the widespread mutual distrust has been the key impetus behind the mania for accreditation, fuelled by simplistic populist political demands for accountability (Stensaker and Harvey, 2010).

**Bureaucracy, transparency, cost**

Fifth, there is a preoccupation with ensuring explicit codified bureaucratic procedures, which have ensured transparency but have been expensive. Newton 2010 states:

> Looking back to the early 1990s, the purposes of ‘quality’ seemed heavily weighted in favour of accountability, while improvement usually felt like a distant second. ... the conference circuit resembled an ongoing ‘bring and buy’ sale, with presenters... seeking to persuade us of the most efficacious ‘model’ or ‘system’ of quality. Often these... systems were imported from industry and business and, in the end, told us very little about quality enhancement or how we might actually improve the student experience, as opposed to improving quality bureaucracy. After all, students, we were told, were to be viewed as ‘customers’.
At a European level, Roznayi (2010) refers to the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR as the ‘double helix’ of quality assurance. ‘The dual incarnation of meta-level quality compliance is a product of the bureaucratisation of the quality assurance trade.’


repeated concerns about the artificiality of quality-assurance processes in higher education. For many academics, they are seen as a burdensome extra, to be responded to through ritualised compliance. Quality assurance fails to be a part of the everyday activity of academics because they perceive no real link between the quality of their academic work (teaching and research) and the performance embodied in quality-assurance processes. (Harvey and Williams, 2010, p. 83)

**Quality and improvement of learning**

Sixth, there has been a general failure to align quality assurance processes with the improvement of student learning. Instead, quality assurance repeats the mantra that improving ‘standards’ (albeit poorly defined) would somehow indicate an improvement in the pedagogic process.

Huisman and Westerheijden (2010) reviewing the development of quality in the Bologna process accepted that “Many positive things can be said about the developments within the Bologna process” since the 1999 action “to promote ‘European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to develop comparable criteria and methodologies’” not least through the development of the ESG. However, “It is questionable what the ESG will actually contribute to improving the education available to students and to assisting higher education institutions in managing and enhancing their quality.” For Huisman and Westerheijden “ESG and EQAR seem to be good examples of decoupling (Power 1997): rather than stimulating change, activities of key players are distant from if not alien to organisational activities of teaching and learning.” Instead they argued, the policy and strategic focus “seems to be on ‘meta-compliance’: does my quality assurance agency live up to the ESG?” Indeed, too much focus is on inviting “actors to compliance; ‘ticking the boxes’ becomes more important than actually showing quality of education.” They concluded:
Quality assurance in the European arena has been said to have moved from the margin (in Bologna 1999) to centre stage (since Berlin 2003) but it increasingly seems to become a play for ministries and agencies; quality on the shop floor level and the student learning experience certainly have not gained the centre stage of attention in this development. (Huisman and Westerheijden, 2010, p. 65)

Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker (2010) suggest that the “seeming inability” of research on quality assurance to address issues on student learning or to explore the impact of quality assurance is perhaps because the centralised control that quality assurance enables “is deemed more important than the improvement impact or, indeed, the opportunity cost of the enterprise”.

In South Africa, quality assurance was linked not just to improvement of higher education but the transformation of the post-Apartheid state. Luckett (2010) noted that the HEQC is committed to engaging with institutions on how they are realising the Department of Education’s ‘transformation imperative’ through their institutional missions, goals, and core business. While HEQC has impacted on institutional practice (Singh and Lange, 2007), the better resourced, research-intensive, institutions have managed to meet the HEQC’s requirements and outperform other types of institution, without necessarily changing their institutional practices around teaching and learning (Boughey, 2009). If the graduation rate of African South African students is accepted as an empirical level indicator of transformation (Scott et al., 2007) then little progress has been made.

Conclusion
This brief review of a huge literature analysis reflects the disinclination of quality assurance to confront the nature of student learning or of the research process. Indeed, quality assurance has avoided any real examination of the intrinsic nature of quality as related to higher education. In short, twenty years of quality assurance has seen the systematic misalignment of quality culture and academic culture. As Saarinen (2010, p. 56) noted:

   In all this, the voice of the academic community has become more subdued, and, consequently, its values less clearly presented. Traditional views of quality as excellence define quality as the virtue of the academic community, whereas the underlying meaning of quality assurance would, in turn, seem to be quality as fitness for purpose or quality as perfection or consistency…. In short, the quality discourses of the 1980s and 1990s reflect the various and ambiguous, but often accountability-related, demands of the period. By the
turn of the Millennium, quality is mostly taken for granted and not particularly defined or questioned. With the Bologna process, the uses of quality have reached a kind of a technical level, as it refers to quality assurance techniques.

So has it all been for nothing? Not entirely, as transparency has been the main outcome. However, transparency and far more improvement could have been achieved for less cost if the effort had been focused on internal quality practices in universities from the outset. Newton (2010, p. 53) has repeatedly argued that:

amongst the lessons learned from the quality revolution is that achieving success in improvement initiatives is riven with difficulties. Quality is ‘essentially contested’; there are competing voices and discourses; front-line academics and managers may view quality differently.

Had we focused more on the internal mechanisms and aligned quality culture with academic culture from the outset then these tensions and differences would have been laid bare in a positive way rather than concealed in various compliance games.

So where now? In looking forward, Roznayi (2010, p. 78) suggested that the core purposes for quality assurance are recognition of studies and qualifications, the promotion of mobility and the advancement of student-centred teaching. For her:

The looking-beyond-its-own-nose is the key to its ultimate success. If quality assurance is a profession, and it is, its practitioners must make sure they know how to inspire higher education institutions and their stakeholders in a learner-centred way to practice good educating; and with the broader goals of higher education always in sight.

References


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