

## **Quality assurance in higher education: which pasts to build on, what futures to contemplate?**

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### **Introduction**

Is there anything new that is intellectually engaging, politically instructive or educationally useful to say about the last two decades of quality assurance in higher education or to insert into quality assurance systems in their multiplying manifestations around the world? A glance at the literature on quality assurance indicates that its policy hawks and doves; its enthusiasts, flag-bearers and praise-singers; its critics, sceptics and cynics; the ostensible losers (academics, the academic project) and ostensible beneficiaries (students, employers, assorted publics); the apparently compliant but undercover academic resisters; its peer co-optees and collaborators; and a multitude of policy and research analysts have all had an airing of their positions, interests and interpretations. In the meantime, the reform juggernaut in higher education rolls ceaselessly on, with reconfigurations, adjustments and refinements to existing national quality assurance systems, the setting up of several regional structures for addressing quality assurance in a trans-national context, the establishment of new systems along all compass points of the world, and a global drive on quality assurance through its incorporation into the priorities and projects of multi-lateral organisations like the OECD. As we head forward, what ancestries and legacies can one build on in quality assurance, and what futures are likely or plausible?

### **Familiar Rationales and Growing Boundaries**

The official policy rationales for national quality assurance are well-rehearsed tales about maintaining quality in the face of massification and differentiation; the necessity for higher education to demonstrate its social accountability to various external stakeholders; higher education showing 'value for money' and efficiency and effectiveness of outputs to justify continuing public investment; the improvement of quality to add optimum value to educational systems, processes and outputs; the protection of students from local and foreign 'degree mills'; increasing the information base on higher education performance to facilitate 'consumer' choice, demonstrating equivalence<sup>1</sup> in the quality of provision to facilitate mobility, and the like. Some permutation of the above underpins the geographical spread of quality assurance across the globe as part of higher education reform and development initiatives in both 'developed' and 'developing' countries.

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<sup>1</sup> J.L.Brennan and M.Singh point to the shift in UK quality assurance from the demonstration of equivalence to the demonstration of difference in *Playing the quality game-whose quality and whose higher education?* In *Knowledge Matters: The Public Mission of Research Universities*, edited by Diana Rhoten and Craig Calhoun, Columbia University Press (forthcoming).

Quality assurance has acquired a global coercive visibility and presence through OECD templates, UNESCO programmes, World Bank projects and loans, and the 'diffusionary' effect of the information-sharing and developmental activities of INQAAHE and various regional quality assurance networks<sup>2</sup> as well as the activities of professional associations and internationally mobile professionals (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002).

However, quality assurance has long moved beyond national policy parameters to become part of regional geo-political ambitions (for example, its key place within the Bologna process) and internationalisation drives (for example, its expected role in facilitating cross-border academic mobility and recognition of qualifications within and across regions (Harman, 1998). Simpler narratives of (national) accountability and educational improvement now have overlays of cross-border trade, regional economic competitiveness (the Lisbon Strategy in Europe), regional revitalisation (as in the African Union's expectations of African higher education) and other political and economic ambitions relating to higher education in a globalising arena. Issues of jurisdictional political power and educational authority in quality assurance have become much more complex and multi-layered as a result. The boundaries of quality assurance have also extended beyond higher education institutions and their programmes to quality agencies themselves; the 'quality assurance of quality assurance'. The adoption by INQAAHE of a set of *Guidelines of Good Practice* for quality assurance agencies in 2005, the adoption of *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG) by European Ministers of Education in the same year, and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register in 2008 which lists agencies in 'substantial compliance' with the ESG, point to the next layer in the quality 'accountability chain' (Singh & Lange, 2007: 201). Added to this is the question of quality assurance's family relationships, shared concerns and unsettled differences with national and regional qualification frameworks, national and global ranking systems, benchmarking exercises, a plethora of user surveys (students, employers) and other such evaluative frameworks for higher education. The last decade has seen a dramatic expansion of quality assurance on many fronts: geographically, politically and in relation to its professional targets and objectives. What benefits has this proliferation of quality assurance jurisdictions, structures and activities produced and for whom? Is it clear that the educational benefits are significant even if they do not outweigh other political and economic rationales relating to external accountability and cost efficiencies?

### **Saving quality assurance from itself**

The published literature shows a strong strand of internal critical engagement with some of the key premises, approaches to and consequences of quality assurance. Such critiques are motivated by the attempt to diminish the external political coerciveness of the enterprise while strengthening its academic logic and optimising its educational benefits. This involves the identification of the most threatening pathologies of external quality assurance before charting an evaluation path that is likely to be more academically acceptable and educationally valuable. Harvey and Newton (2004) capture many of the key dimensions of the attempt to 'transform' external quality assurance: to refocus and re-orientate it to the actual improvement of teaching and learning. They point, for example, to the need to re-balance regulation for accountability and quality enhancement; to link quality evaluation more explicitly to learning; to prioritise improvement of the student learning

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<sup>2</sup> The INQAAHE website lists 11 quality assurance networks spread across the Arab world, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Western, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. See [www.inqaahe.org](http://www.inqaahe.org)

experience as the main demonstrable goal over making institutional quality assurance measures ever more efficient; to the need for more reflection and research-based evidence to inform evaluation; to make academics central to enhancement-led evaluation; and to connect external and internal evaluation processes in ways that add real value to the latter. Barnett (1994:165) reinforces the idea of benefits to teaching and to society from viewing quality evaluations as a 'form of enlightenment' which deepens the self-understanding of academics rather than as a mechanism of 'state surveillance.'

It is unclear whether the shift to enhancement is predicated on an earlier, perhaps necessary 'feeding of the beast' (Newton, 2000:153) phase of accountability-driven quality assurance. The Scottish Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), for example, makes it clear that its enhancement focus emerged from the previous, more than a decade-long experience of audit and review.<sup>3</sup> It is an interesting issue for new systems as to whether they could (if they so wished) leapfrog the worst of accountability-mediated external quality assurance and go straight into a first phase of collegial enhancement-driven quality assurance focused on student learning. Or is it the case that some version of the accountability-improvement 'two step' is unavoidable, given that systems that started with a collegial improvement focus, for example, the US accreditation system, are now moving towards a stronger accountability régime, under pressure from national/federal authorities? It may also be the case that this matter has hardly any evolutionary logic relating to quality and is largely a reflection of shifting political wind direction.

### **Interpretations, Critiques and Impact Claims**

A more theoretical literature in the field comes from the attempts to interpret and assess quality assurance as a phenomenon both shaped by and shaping the reformist change trajectory in higher education in the past few decades. These studies provide a broader analytical framework to locate and understand quality assurance as a constituent element of reform policy, map its translations into systems and processes, and gauge its impact on organisational and academic structures and cultures. The characterisation of external quality assurance as marking the rise of managerialism and the fall of trust in academe (Trow, 1994), the idea of the evaluative state (Neave, 1998) and the steering of higher education through intermediary bodies like quality assurance bodies, the rise of audit cultures (Strathern, 2000), the fit of quality assurance in New Public Management policy (Kogan *et al.*, 2000) and declining academic power under the impact of quality assurance in the Clark triangle of states, markets and academe (Clark, 1983) are some of the critical vantage points for theorising quality assurance and its roles and impacts in contemporary higher education policy and practice. Quality assurance has been variously critiqued as a policy instrument of state regulation, as management-friendly, as market-friendly but also market-averse (the view that markets in higher education would more efficiently serve consumer choice than quality assurance as a tool of the 'nanny state.')

The penetration of quality assurance into higher education systems and institutions has been little deflected or mediated by the logic and persuasiveness of these critical interpretations. In the face of proliferating quality assurance and uncertain benefits, the quality assurance community is much preoccupied with questions about the impact of external evaluations on institutions and programmes. Many of the above critiques of quality assurance presume a set of primarily negative

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<sup>3</sup> See Preface to the second edition of the Enhancement-led institutional review handbook, QAA 2008.

impacts on higher education, viewed from the point of view of assaults on academic freedom and institutional autonomy by state and managerial power, the marketisation of higher education and the bureaucratisation of academic processes. Many in the quality assurance community assume that the benefits are 'mostly positive', looking mainly internally to agency processes (Harvey, 2006). Is there a substantial enough research and evidence base for making claims about the impacts of quality assurance, both negative and positive? And, in undertaking impact research, what methodological pathways and epistemological assumptions are likely to yield credible and useful insights and understandings into quality assurance and its effects within higher education?

### **Centres and Peripheries in Quality Assurance**

A look at some of the special issues of *Quality in Higher Education*<sup>4</sup> or INQAAHE's list of over 200 members and its affiliated regional structures provides a graphic account of how much territory quality assurance has colonised. Many 'practitioners' from across the globe are filling journals with chronicles about their systems, which may not be more than variations on some well-worn themes, taking some obvious issues of context into account. How is one to think about the empire of quality assurance? Is it useful to think of quality assurance centres and peripheries: the systems of countries with long traditions of quality assurance (for example, the US and the UK) become 'templates' for emulation and adaptation in the peripheries<sup>5</sup>, with the assistance of circulating professionals and consultants? Or do the newer systems, especially in the outposts of the 'developing' world, have a more muscular frontier spirit, bringing new possibilities into routinised ways of undertaking quality assurance? Given its global spread, does it make sense to continue to think of quality assurance as the 'same thing' being undertaken in the usual places *as well as* in a number of additional 'exotic' places? Beyond the chronicle type reporting from near and far may lie potentially more interesting analyses of how ongoing political and educational tensions are being negotiated between the isomorphism of quality assurance techniques on the one hand and the imperatives of contextual environments and local purposes on the other, and what or who the winners and losers might be. Are innovative adaptations in the form of creative reformulations of purpose, strategy and outcomes emerging in the rich diversity of contexts, especially in the peripheries, or do the templates from the 'centre' dominate and overwhelm as global 'good practice.'?

### **Outliers or Contextual Innovators?**

The contours of quality assurance systems are ostensibly determined by its purposes and contexts (Brennan, 2001). A great deal depends on how broadly or narrowly one frames the key questions in thinking about purposes. This goes to the heart of how one defines quality and to what larger social purposes one connects quality in higher education. Social accountability, academic improvement, institutional performance efficiency and effectiveness, 'value for money', and 'consumer' protection have become routine and predictable elements in questions about the purposes of quality assurance across diverse contexts. Occasionally, though infrequently, there have been more systematic attempts to connect the quality question with other social purposes like equity, social justice and

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, International Developments in Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement in 2004, Quality Assurance in the Gulf States in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Given the spread of quality assurance in the 'developing world', it is easy to have a particular image of its diffusion from the Northern centre to the Southern peripheries but Rhoades and Sporn's analysis (2002) usefully reminds us of the influence of US quality assurance on European higher education.

democracy, in a broader understanding of social accountability than the one that usually informs quality assurance discourses. In the US, the issues of affirmative action and diversity have featured in accreditation systems.<sup>6</sup> In South Africa, the quality assurance system has included criteria on social justice and social transformation (Lange & Singh, 2009). Harvey (2009:5) has raised questions not only about the need to democratise quality from some of its autocratic forms but whether quality could itself be an “agent of democracy”. Are such approaches outliers that operate too far away from the main body of ‘recognisable’ quality assurance, making an illegitimate foray into political and epistemological jurisdictions that lie beyond quality? Or are they responsive attempts to take fuller account of contextual imperatives and contemporary social struggles which inevitably shape the purposes of higher education as well as definitions of quality? As quality assurance spreads across diverse historical and geographical contexts, especially where higher education reform is part of ongoing attempts to create more equitable and democratic societies, is it likely that quality issues will be connected to a wider set of social questions than the ones traditionally posed in context?

### **The Futures of Quality Assurance**

One easy assumption about the next decade of quality assurance is that it will continue to be a round of variations on the same theme, with the balance between accountability and improvement, between external social pressure and internal academic control riding on a see-saw shaped largely by the choices and views of policy-makers about higher education accountability and responsiveness. On such an expectation, established systems would continue tinkering at the edges while newer ones would become increasingly institutionalised. But perhaps the assumption that quality assurance, as is familiar to us now, will continue to be a central component of globally widespread higher education reform policy into the next decade is itself open to question. Will its many current practitioners and even some of its critics come to think of quality assurance with some qualified nostalgia as it cedes accountability ground to more performance indicators, more user-satisfaction surveys, more sophisticated ranking systems (including national and disciplinary systems) and multiplying metrics as measures of performance assessment in higher education and targets for improvement?<sup>7</sup> How is quality assurance likely to change, perhaps toughen up, under the pressure of a renewed ‘accountability speak’ which is premised on more measurable and costed outcomes? In the face of an increasingly ‘metricated’ future, acting on norms like ensuring that evaluations are of educational benefit closest to the pedagogic ground or seeking to link evaluations to larger social purposes beyond economic and reputational wars will become much harder. In turn, any chance of redeeming quality assurance as an enterprise that could help strengthen reflexivity within the academic project will become even less likely.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, [www.acwasc.org](http://www.acwasc.org)

<sup>7</sup> See E. Hazelkorn, *The emperor has no clothes?: Rankings and the shift from quality assurance to world class excellence*, Trends in Quality Assurance, EUA, 2009.

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