John Brennan, Emeritus Professor at the Open University, and Visiting Professor at the University of Bath and London Metropolitan University, reflects on the impact and the uses of quality assurance from its early beginnings to the present time.

Foreword

This paper draws on Professor John Brennan’s 30-plus years’ experience as a quality assurance practitioner, researcher and advisor - both in the UK and internationally - and seeks to locate the current UK quality scene within larger international and historical perspectives.

Professor Brennan asks:

- What has quality assurance contributed to change and innovation within higher education?
- What mechanisms can facilitate or block changes?
- Whose interests are being served by the changes?

John goes on to ask whether current quality assurance developments should be welcomed, feared, subverted or embraced.

At the end of the paper, we have included a response from Jon Renyard, Chair of the Quality Strategy Network.

Readers can comment via the QAA website at:
Introduction

Current discussions about the quality assurance of UK higher education are heavily embedded within the growing marketisation of higher education and its emphasis upon students (and others) as consumers, and the belief that more informed consumers will work to drive up quality. While the new fees regime gives particular impetus to this, it represents an approach to quality which places a growing emphasis on reputational hierarchy and differentiation of higher education institutions as a key outcome of quality assurance processes.

This paper focuses on the contribution of quality assurance to change and innovation within higher education. It also looks at whose interests are being served by these changes, as well as the various mechanisms which can either facilitate or block such changes.

The first part of this paper provides a series of examples of the impact of quality assurance processes on higher education institutions and the wider publics which are served by them. It draws on UK experience over several years, under different quality regimes - and on a variety of international experiences. The implications of this experience for different groups within higher education are considered, and I examine whether current quality assurance developments should be welcomed, feared, subverted or embraced. I also consider the implication of the growing student-focused emphasis of debates around quality in the UK.

Action equals benefits

I want to argue that some of the important benefits which effective quality assurance can deliver include:

- learning from others - through peer review processes
- awareness of difference - through review and benchmarking exercises
- greater evidence-based decision-making - not just by national policy makers but by students, employers, academics, administrators and managers.

But the achievement of these benefits requires collective and collaborative actions by higher education institutions, not just competitive ones, and by the people in them - whether academics, managers, support professionals or students. Quality assurance which focuses on the central processes and outcomes of teaching and research can make an important contribution to the effective functioning of higher education institutions. But this contribution can be lost if the focus is mainly on rankings and 'who wins the competitive race'.

Some experiences shared

I would like to record just a few of my experiences of quality assurance processes in higher education. Let me start with a memory from long ago. Prior to the establishment of the polytechnics and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) as their degree-awarding body (and arguably the first UK national quality assurance agency), there existed a large number of colleges which provided degree courses that led to awards of the University of London. London 'external' degrees had the same curricula and assessments as London 'internal' degrees, and students' work was marked by the same University of London academics. Thus, students could obtain quite a decent degree from the University of London without ever having set foot in the place. And if you had a University of London degree, there were no questions asked about standards or reputation. I obtained one of those degrees myself.

'Much of today's debate on quality is about demonstrating difference and hierarchy'

I mention the old London external system (which still exists, although largely for international students) because it seems to me that much of today's debate on quality is about demonstrating difference and hierarchy (where are the 'top' places and the 'best' people?), and about identifying
and enforcing institutional policies and administrative procedures for quality which can be quite
distant from the experiences and learning outcomes of students. Processes such as the National
Student Survey (NSS) and the Research Evaluation Framework (REF) and related rankings are
about the former, while academic audit can sometimes seem to be about the latter. However, the
London external system was about ensuring direct comparability of standards through the direct
external assessment of students' work.

But this was long ago. Higher education was still a small and relatively elite system; it contained a
diverse range of non-university institutions, but there were not the pressures to produce a status
differentiation of institutions and outcomes, although reputational differences clearly existed. The
impact of the London external system was to ensure and demonstrate that comparable standards
existed, irrespective of where the student had studied. Today, excellence is defined as being 'better
than' somebody else and notions of comparability tend to be rejected.

International events

Now let me share a few slightly more recent memories of quality assurance events. First, a few
international ones.

At the end of the 1990s, my research centre undertook a number of projects in central and
eastern Europe for the European Commission. These were largely concerned with the transfer of
experience and practice from western European countries to the newly 'liberated' regimes of the
east. One of these projects concerned Bulgaria, where we were asked to help in the establishment
of a national quality agency. We placed one of our researchers in Sofia, and several of us paid
repeated visits there over the course of the project. The impression I gained was that Bulgaria was
quite a centralised state with a Sofia-based elite tending to dominate in most fields.

Of the three higher education ministers I met during that time, all were simultaneously professors
at the University of Sofia. The views and culture of the main capital city university tended to
provide the lens through which quality issues were judged. At the same time, in common with
many countries in central and eastern Europe, there was a growth in private universities in
Bulgaria. One of these was a 'business university' some distance from Sofia. The Sofia academic
elite were pretty sceptical of these sorts of institutions and one of the functions of quality assurance
was seen to be to demonstrate their failings.

A few years later, after our project was finished, I happened to meet a couple of staff from the
Bulgarian quality agency. I asked how things were going and was told that the external peer
review visits had commenced earlier that year and were proving interesting. A recent visit had
been to the private 'business university' about which such scepticism had been expressed a few
years back. The outcome? I was informed that it received a brilliant report - the best yet - and that
it was now regarded as one of Bulgaria's top institutions and a model for other universities.

As with the former London polytechnic, this provides another example of how quality assurance
can play a major reputational enhancing role within increasingly stratified higher education
systems. In the present day, with a growing diversity of institutions and providers, most of us have
only a very limited direct experience of the full range of higher education institutions and have
only limited information on which to base reputational judgements.

Internal agendas

While a reputational effect is important to many quality assurance activities, impact can also take
other forms. A few years ago I was a member of an evaluation team reviewing a major university
in one of Europe's capital cities on behalf of its national quality agency. As is standard practice
for such reviews, the first stage of the evaluation had been the preparation of a self-evaluation
report by the university. The university's rector had played a leading role in the preparation of the
report, which had turned out to be a highly self-critical document, so much so that it had been the
subject of reports on local television.
The subsequent external review was relatively straightforward and was certainly not strongly critical of the university. What appeared to have happened in this case was that the local university leadership was using the occasion of the external review to establish its own change agenda within the institution and to tackle problems already identified. As the dominant national university, it did not see much reputational risk attached to the evaluation and so could afford to use the event to progress an institutional-change agenda.

These projects found that in some cases the major impact came from the internal self-evaluation process

My research centre carried out a number of projects looking into the effects of quality assurance processes, both in the UK and internationally. These projects found that in some cases the major impact came from the internal self-evaluation process, rather than a visit from an external review team. As in the example above, some staff within the institution would use the opportunity to address known problems or frustrations. As well as management-related staff there were also examples of academic staff using the review process to raise the status and attention given to teaching in an environment which otherwise focused mainly on research. There were examples of subject groups using the review to promote their subject and gain additional institutional resources for it.

Such cases were not without risks, in that external reviewers could take up the issues for their agenda and use them as a basis for negative conclusions about the institution. Thus, it was the institutions that viewed themselves as being beyond reputational risk which tended to be more inclined to use review processes for these ‘internal agendas’.

Learning and change

What the above suggests is that the external element of quality assurance brings with it the possibility of both reputational risk and reputational gain. But it also brings with it the potential for institutional learning and change. This works differently in different institutional contexts according to whether there is much existing reputation to lose, with particular risks for institutions with rather fragile reputations which, if damaged, could have a critical impact. Caution and compliance in addressing quality assurance processes are likely to accompany perceptions of reputational risk. Two further examples reinforce this point.

Talking with a rector of a leading European university quite recently, I was informed that the university had little interest in quality assurance by the country’s national quality agency. It could tell the university nothing that it was not already aware of and did not possess the authority to either damage or enhance the university’s strong national and international reputation. International quality assurance was, however, another matter, bringing with it opportunities to learn from the experiences of other leading universities from around the world with reputation enhancing potential if positive judgements were reached.

The impact of a long gone national quality body on everyday practice at this institution appeared to be stronger than the impact of its contemporary replacement

Contrast the above conversation with another I had with a Pro Vice-Chancellor at a UK university, a former polytechnic, a few years ago. It was in connection with a project I was carrying out on student learning experiences and how these were affected by social and organisational features of the institutional context. At one point I asked the Pro Vice-Chancellor about the university’s attitude to QAA. I was told that ‘we regard it as very important and take its requirements very seriously’. In elaborating the point, the Pro Vice-Chancellor emphasised that an institution of this type could not afford the reputational risk of an embarrassing encounter with QAA. I asked the Pro Vice-Chancellor about the implications this had for teaching and learning within the university. ‘None at all’, was the reply. ‘It’s all about compliance’.
I was about to move on to another topic, but the Pro Vice-Chancellor had more that he wanted to say: 'But you should realise that for over 20 years, this institution was subject to the requirements of the CNAA and that association put in place processes and an institutional culture which remain central to life in this institution today.' Thus, the impact of a long gone national quality body on everyday practice at this institution appeared to be stronger than the impact of its contemporary replacement.

There is a large body of academic literature available on the difficulties of bringing about change in universities. History, tradition and local cultures count for a lot. But at particular stages in an institution's development, external influences can be important. So the above conversation should not be interpreted as implying that the CNAA was somehow 'better' than QAA, rather that at an important stage in the development of this particular institution, the CNAA external review processes had had a major formative influence which had a long-lasting effect. At a different time and a different place, the relative impacts of the two agencies could be reversed.

**In search of 'quality impact'**

In considering the impact of different quality assurance systems and mechanisms, there are different audiences to take into account, for example, students, academics, wider publics and politicians. The impact on any of these audiences can be direct but it can also be indirect, whereby the actions of one audience (for example, student applications, funding decisions) can have an effect on all the other audiences.

There are also a host of contextual factors to take into account before we can attempt any conclusion about the impacts of different quality assurance processes. The following list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The nature of the quality assurance process</th>
<th>Where the power lies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>peer review</td>
<td>subject-based academics</td>
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<td>self-evaluation</td>
<td>quality assurance professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td>performance indicators</td>
<td>academic managers</td>
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<tr>
<td>consumer satisfaction</td>
<td>students/consumers - all of whom may be internal or external to the institution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>procedural compliance</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>The focus of the quality assurance process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>teaching - curriculum, learning outcomes, pedagogies</td>
<td>to ensure minimum standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research - outputs, impact, relevance</td>
<td>give impetus and support for quality improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research and teaching in combination</td>
<td>provide market information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quality assurance systems and procedures</td>
<td>justify public funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resourcing and management</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>The level of analysis</th>
<th>The method(s) employed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>institution</td>
<td>collection of survey data - students, graduates, employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty/department</td>
<td>input and output statistics - admissions, drop-out, results, employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>peer review - visits and evaluations by external academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>course</td>
<td>research outputs - publications, citations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>procedural checks - codes of practice and so on.</td>
</tr>
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The above list is not comprehensive. Most quality assurance activity is some combination of the above, with the precise combination changing over time and in different places. It is the combination that determines the likely impact of any particular quality assurance process. With that caveat in place, we can identify the following possible impacts:

- reputational risk or enhancement
- improved self-understanding within the unit being assessed
- changes in practices and relationships
- better information for promotional purposes
- comparative rankings.

These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although to some extent they are. The more public the exercise, the greater the reputational risk to the institution and the greater the possibility of 'cover-up' and a public relations approach by the institution, rather than an opportunity for critical self-analysis and change. I have known some national quality systems which address this tension by producing different outputs for different audiences: a published report to satisfy requirements of public accountability and market information and a more informal, and if necessary more critical, report to an institution’s senior management. Who else sees or even knows about the latter differs between places and cases.

'More generally, quality assurance activities may either confirm or challenge existing practices within an institution'

In considering questions of impact, it is always necessary to take account of time-scales. The extremes here will include the 'big news event' of a published quality report, which leads to little or no action and is soon forgotten. The 'we've got that over with' reaction. And at the other extreme, a possibly unacknowledged change in practices and culture which may become an integral part of an institution over many decades. It is a bit like assessing students’ work. It can produce the 'great, I've got an A' response or the 'I'd never thought of that before; I'd better change what I do from now on' response. More generally, quality assurance activities may either confirm or challenge existing practices within an institution.

'Event' quality assurance

In part, the above distinctions can be related to the difference between 'event' and 'continuous' quality assurance activities. 'Events' are the audits and assessments which come round regularly in most institutions of higher education. Some of these are externally imposed and managed. QAA audits would be an example of the former. But some are a result of internal policies and procedures within an institution. Often there is a mix of the two. For example, one can find many universities which institute external evaluations of particular sub-units of the institution and who bring in external academic peers from other universities to undertake the evaluation. Often - particularly in continental Europe - these may be international peers and this brings the challenge of providing them with sufficient national and institutional contextual information to fully understand local circumstances.

The 'balance of power' within such institutionally organised evaluations can be difficult and unpredictable. The evaluation is conducted on behalf of the institution but the external peers may have a shared loyalty to subject-based colleagues who are under review. This shouldn't matter if the object of the exercise is concerned with development and improvement, but if there are reputational or resource allocation consequences, for example, there may be tensions.

A difference between the externally and internally imposed quality assurance events is that in the former the peers are likely to have undergone some form of training by the external agency. That may be to the good - they know what they are doing! But it can also indicate a difference in power and 'loyalty', a different balance between commitment to the policies of the agency and loyalty to subject norms and interests.
Ritualistic processes

'Continuous' quality assurance activities include regular student feedback surveys, monitoring of performance, external examiner reports, collecting data on staff publications and so on. From experience of researching these processes over the years, my impression is that these can tend to the ritualistic. A lot of energy can be expended in the collection of data but little is then done with it by way of analysis, interpretation or action.

As with the distinction between external and internal quality 'events', there is also a power question relating to who undertakes and uses continuous quality assurance activities. This generally divides up between local or central organisational units but there is also a distinction to be made between those who carry out the quality activities and those who they report to within the institution.

There are various possibilities. Quality surveys and the like may be carried out locally at the direction of a central unit or committee which will have responsibility for actions taken in response to data collected. And sometimes quality assurance is carried out by a central unit - equipped with the necessary expertise and instruments - but the results are submitted to and acted upon by a local unit, typically a department or faculty.

These differences in approach have implications for the effects and impact of quality assurance activities. Local actions are the more likely to engage academics, individually and collectively, and to lead to changes in practice. But the centre is likely to be the better equipped to address resource, personnel and organisational issues. What is common to virtually all these processes is that they involve people talking to each other.

I remember in the mid-90s talking to a university administrator involved with the teaching quality assessment reviews (TQA) who told me that since TQA had arrived he could not walk across the campus without being approached by academics seeking advice and information connected with forthcoming TQA events. Prior to TQA, he had been invisible around the institution. After it, he was famous! Similarly, quality assurance provides opportunities for academics to talk to each other, both within and between subject departments and faculties. Experiences and views get exchanged. Something might even be learned....

Changes in authority and ideology

As has already been indicated, the impacts of quality assurance activities in higher education are a function of the methods used, the institutional context, and the relative power of those involved. On this last point, there have been major changes in the 30 or so years that I have been researching higher education and quality assurance processes. Back in the 1970s, power and decision making usually rested in the basic unit of the academic department. Not necessarily only with the professoriate, at least not in the UK, as the democratic 1960s had led to a growth in participatory decision-making in most universities. But a lot of decisions tended to be taken locally, reflecting local interests and power distribution.

The 1980s and 90s saw the steady growth of 'managerialism' in most universities, with power gradually shifting to the centre and reflecting institutional mission statements and, increasingly, the competitive business interests of universities. To a greater or lesser extent in many countries, and reflecting very different starting points and traditions, power and decision-making became increasingly located within the institutional centres of universities with top-down leadership replacing bottom-up initiative.

Powers traditionally exercised either by the state and national agencies or by departments/faculties within institutions shifted in many countries towards the central managements of institutions. This has tended to move the focus of quality assurance away from academic subject interests (for example, curricula and research programmes) towards the implementation of institutional procedures and controls along with increasing attention to the monitoring of performance.
Separating teaching and research

A distinctive feature of UK quality assurance systems over this period has been the separation of the systems and processes of evaluating teaching and research. Although interconnected in the everyday practice of universities, their assessment and evaluation has been kept completely separate. This is not the case everywhere. For example, the University of Vienna has been undertaking systematic ‘holistic’ evaluations of its faculties for several years now. Research and teaching - together with all relevant support services - are assessed using a process of international peer review.

While the assessment of research quality remains strongly embedded within a subject-based peer review system, the latest developments within the assessment of teaching quality have placed increasing emphasis on the student (or ‘consumer’) perspective. First, the National Student Survey (NSS), then the greater student input into the QAA audit process, have been the main ways in which power has begun to pass to the students. And the increasing emphasis on the provision of public information about the quality of courses represents a shift in power away from institutions towards students as consumers, or a shift from the ‘supply’ side to the ‘demand’ side. While there is not a lot of evidence that students actually use this information in selecting their courses and institutions, its conversion into institutional rankings and league tables undoubtedly has a reputational effect.

'It can be argued that 'ownership' over teaching quality in higher education has passed from the academic profession to the managements of institutions'

On the issue of the student as ‘consumer’, there is one point that I would like to make on the basis of a research project I was involved in a few years ago. This explored the student experience by following students from their first year through the subsequent years of their undergraduate programmes.

One of the things that was interesting about this research was that factors which had been identified as important by first year students in shaping their choice of course and institution had been largely replaced by a different set of factors by the final year students in assessing what had been most valuable in their experience of higher education. The implication is that if universities had listened too closely to what the students had said they had ‘wanted’, they might have deprived them of the very things which they subsequently found of most value.

In summary, it can be argued that ‘ownership’ over teaching quality in higher education has passed from the academic profession to the managements of institutions and now, to some extent, on to the students (and their parents and advisors), particularly in their role as consumers within a large and differentiated higher education marketplace. Quality assurance professionals, academics in their peer review roles, as well as institutional managers, all have their significant parts to play but the current government seems to have greater faith in the capacity of markets rather than in integrity and effectiveness of professional judgements to achieve a high quality higher education system. In research, academics retain significant control through peer review exercises of different sorts although there are real signs that academic authority will increasingly be shared with the users of research through the greater focus on research impact in the forthcoming Research Evaluation Framework.

A quality future?

So where does all this take us? What can we expect in the future? And what should be the response of the various groups working in higher education?

A much discussed development is, of course, the massive increase in student fees. There is much debate about its likely effects on student choices, whether to enter higher education at all and whether to be more selective about what and where to study. Data on the relative quality of courses and institutions is intended to influence the decisions of students and to do so in ways
which will work to 'drive up' quality. However, the most dominant quality criterion for students is probably still the one of 'how difficult it is to gain admission'. In a sense this is a 'quality of student' criterion rather than a 'quality of course/institution' criterion, although clearly the two might be related. It is not clear whether and how the various outputs of quality assurance procedures enter into the student decision-making processes.

Another important consideration to take into account is the steep vertical differentiation of higher education in the UK. Unlike many continental European countries where students tend to study at their local university and there are assumptions of a broad equivalence between universities, in the UK there is a sharp stratification and a belief that attendance at a more prestigious institution will provide a better experience and a more marketable qualification. Such a belief is, of course, rather self-fulfilling and does not need to be related to hard data on quality differences. But over the years the emphasis has shifted from assuring consistent minimum standards which are comparable across courses and institutions to demonstrating hierarchy and difference. There is a perception that 'better quality' will provide potential reputational gain which can be traded for business success and, in difficult times, even institutional survival.

So, what to do?

For institutional leaderships, there is an understandable desire to avoid reputational risk and achieve some competitive advantage through quality assurance processes. This is especially the case with regard to research where there is also a direct link with funding. But the financial effects could also become more important for teaching quality if the intentions of achieving a competitive marketplace for students are successful.

'Chasing REF and NSS scores diverts attention away from the central functions of higher education'

However, it is known that this model can sometimes produce quite subversive behaviours within institutions. For example, it is known that some institutions have been trying to persuade students to give them a 'good score' in the NSS on the grounds that this will enhance institutional reputation and hence the market value of the student's degree. It is always a problem that systems which take the form of a competition shift attention to practices which will help achieve success in the competition rather than practices which will achieve a larger public good through improvements which can benefit all.

Conclusion

It is not realistic to expect institutions to ignore the competitive games which they are being asked to play. But it would be good if they could remember that they are only games and that universities continue to have important functions to play and important social impacts to make which do not depend on rankings and competitive advantage. Quality assurance processes can make an important contribution to these functions, by providing opportunities for institutional learning - from self and from others - and as potential drivers of change.

'If the game can be won by manipulating information, there is a strong incentive to do so'

In addressing their strategies for quality assurance, higher education institutions face a number of issues. The first is how much time and effort to invest? And whose time and effort? (Academics? Administrators? Quality assurance professionals? Senior managers?) A second issue is how honest to be. If the game can be won by manipulating information, there is a strong incentive to do so. Effective quality assurance processes can both identify problems and successes. In some circumstances, it may seem desirable to advertise the latter and to keep quiet about the former.

However, if we can maintain at least some belief that quality assurance processes can be about more than just a competitive game, there are real benefits to be achieved for both the providers and the users of higher education. The danger is that chasing REF and NSS scores diverts attention
away from the central functions of higher education and the quality of the learning that takes place and the new knowledge that is produced. It is to be hoped that quality assurance will not forget these larger issues amid the anxieties of reputation and success in the competitive race.

About the author: John Brennan

John Brennan is Emeritus Professor at the Open University and Visiting Professor at the University of Bath and London Metropolitan University.

The assessment of quality in higher education has been a large part of John’s professional life for over 30 years. Various jobs within the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) were followed by the creation of a ‘Quality Support Centre’ at the Open University. The latter became the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), but continued to undertake various projects concerned with the operation of quality assurance systems, both in the UK and internationally.

As well as projects examining the operation and impacts of the ever-changing UK quality regime, John undertook work for bodies such as the OECD and EC on quality management and evaluation themes internationally. Many reports and several books on higher education quality followed.

Although the Open University closed CHERI last year, John is still heavily involved with the quality assurance of higher education and is a member of the University of Vienna’s Scientific Evaluation Board and an auditor for the Hong Kong University Grants Committee. He is involved in various quality assurance-related projects, and is regularly invited to write articles on quality in higher education.

Securing a quality future

Jon Renyard, Chair of the Quality Strategy Network Executive, Director of Academic Services at the Arts University College at Bournemouth and Chair of the GuildHE Quality Management Network comments on Professor Brennan’s paper.

Professor Brennan’s paper on the recent history of quality assurance is an interesting read, and much of the landscape he describes is recognisable - including the references to comments made by senior institutional figures about quality management, and indeed their views on the impact and relevance of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

The perception of quality assurance within the UK has, in my view, been seriously damaged by the suggestion that quality is ‘what the QAA demands’. Indeed, it is a sad truth that this argument has sometimes been perpetuated by administrators, welcoming it as a stick with which to beat the recalcitrant. But I know I speak on behalf of senior quality managers across the sector in being clear that this has never been what quality management is about. We don’t have institutional quality management procedures (external examination, validation, annual review, periodic review and the like) to satisfy QAA; we have them because they enable us to be sure that we are delivering a high quality and valuable experience to all our students.

Maybe I am fortunate that I started working in quality management in 1996, so QAA is basically all I’ve known, but it has always seemed to me that the external audit process for quality management should be confirmatory, recognising existing sound institutional practice, rather than being compliance-led.

The challenge is that it’s not always obvious what defines a high quality experience, and how it should be measured. Everyone has their view: relevant, interesting and academically challenging curriculum; inspiring teaching; helpful feedback; excellent access to industry-standard resources; strong retention and achievement rates; preparation for employment. And of course, it’s all of these things, but as we know from the sector feedback on the Key Information Sets (KIS), they’re not easily susceptible to simple measurement leading to meaningful comparison. What we’re all trying to do is to deliver a high quality experience for everyone who enters higher education, balancing all of these indicators - and as Professor Brennan points out, the least relevant of all the measures is the one which seems to rate the highest, namely the entry tariff.
Another prejudice: we have no hesitation in allowing the surgeon to be the expert on surgery, or the engineer when it comes to bridge-building. For some reason, everyone thinks they have an equal and valid view on quality in higher education. But there are experts in quality management too. And it’s a complex business - it involves creating the structures that enable academic colleagues to make sound judgement about programmes of study (either their own, or those of another institution), and enable institutions to balance all of the indicators as relevant to the particular courses they offer, and the students they offer them to.

'It's imperative that we hold our nerve'

We all have duties and loyalties to our institutions, and we all take these very seriously. As a senior manager at my own institution, I have a primary responsibility to ensure our sustainability and success. But I also believe passionately that this is done most effectively through an honest appraisal of where we are, to build success on firm foundations. I worry that those who 'play the game' will, sooner or later, get 'found out' - either through systemic failure, having responded to symptom instead of cause, or simply through their figures not quite adding up.

Quality management faces a major challenge. There is the pressure of the new fees regime (including the imponderables of AAB+ and core/margin) and the associated publication of the KIS. There is QAA, seeking to rate institutions on a four-point scale which may, or may not, align with KIS data. And these will inevitably bring pressures from senior managers, concerned about institutional sustainability and no doubt tempted, in some cases, to encourage us to 'play the game'.

But ultimately, in our professional hearts, we know that we have a job to do for the good of the institution and its students - not to serve league-tables or budget lines, or the threat of negative report by QAA when we know we're doing the right thing, but to ensure that students are well-served, and the institution enabled to learn and grow. Now, more than ever, it's imperative that we hold our nerve.

About this publication

Talking about quality is a series of articles published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in which experts explore issues of key interest to the higher education sector.

In publishing these papers we intend to provoke new ideas, stimulate debate and inform the development of higher education policy. The series will give a platform to experts in the UK and internationally.

The articles published in this series deliberately do not offer a 'QAA perspective' on policy developments. However, we welcome the opportunity to engage with the ideas raised as we develop our own views on key issues.

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