

# TRENDS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

A SELECTION OF PAPERS FROM THE 3<sup>RD</sup> EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE FORUM





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3<sup>RD</sup> EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE  
FORUM**

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# □ FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of a European Quality Assurance Forum was proposed by EUA to the "E4 Group" (ENQA, ESU, EUA, and EURASHE) in 2003. The proposal for an annual European QA Forum grew from the observation that the dialogue among QA agencies, higher education institutions and students was happening at national rather than at European level. Thus, it seemed important to create an annual European event that gathers all actors in order to discuss quality issues in the context of the changing higher education landscape, examine European and international QA trends, and improve the articulation between quality culture and external accountability.

The first forum was offered in 2006 at the Technical University of Munich and was immediately recognised as a mile-stone in meeting these objectives. The second Forum, hosted by the Sapienza Università di Roma in 2007, demonstrated that the forum had become the premiere European quality assurance event. The third Forum, hosted by Corvinus University of Budapest and focused upon "Trends in Quality Assurance", attracted 500 participants from 55 countries, including 11 from outside Europe, thus demonstrating the growing international interest in this European event. Participants included academics responsible for internal quality and students, as well as representatives from QA agencies, national authorities and intergovernmental organisations.

The main themes of the 2008 Forum included:

- discussions on how higher education institutions and QA agencies are responding to new challenges, such as learning outcomes.
- an examination of the (positive or negative) impact that rankings have on quality levels and their unintended consequences

This publication gathers together a representative sample of the contributions to the Forum. It includes some of the keynote presentations as well as a few of the many excellent papers that contributed to lively discussions in the parallel sessions. The keynotes discuss quality assurance from a conceptual and policy perspective. The papers are mostly focused on institutional case studies and show the variety of ways in which higher education institutions and QA agencies work on quality. It is worth noting that many contributors used the 2008 forum as an opportunity to test their ideas for new quality assurance initiatives or to receive feedback on ongoing activities. Among these is the rising interest in involving students in quality assurance or examples of QA cooperation across borders.

The Forum Organising Committee hopes that this collection of papers will inspire higher education institutions, academic staff, students and QA agencies to reflect upon ways of ensuring quality while respecting the need for diversity and innovative practices in research and education.

On behalf of the Forum Organising Committee, I wish to thank the following for their support of this activity: Corvinus University of Budapest that hosted the Forum with a great sense of organisation and hospitality, the 85 authors who submitted papers to the Forum, the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission which funded it partially, and Thérèse Zhang and Réka Sipos, EUA, who spearheaded its organisation on behalf of the E4.

The European Quality Assurance Forum will be offered again on 19 – 21 November 2009 at the Copenhagen Business School and will focus upon an examination of how creativity and diversity in higher education can be supported by quality assurance. We hope to repeat the success of the first three Forums and look forward to welcoming you then.

**Henrik Toft Jensen**

Chair, Forum Organising Committee

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## Democratising quality

Lee Harvey<sup>1</sup>

The title has two inferences. First, that quality needs democratising; that is, that it needs to be a more democratic process. A second inference is that quality is a democratising process; that it acts as an agent for democracy.

The question, though, is what is meant by quality in this context? Clearly, the setting is the quality of higher education provision but does 'quality' here mean the intrinsic quality of the process or is it short hand for 'quality assurance'? As this is a Quality Assurance Forum, it is appropriate to start with the latter.

Is quality assurance a process that encourages a more democratic approach to the higher education processes of learning and research?<sup>2</sup> Or is quality assurance a non-democratic edifice that is in need of democratisation?

Before attempting to answer these twin questions, a brief review of what is meant by democracy and, thus, democratisation. No doubt we are all aware of Abraham Lincoln's view that democracy is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people". This approach, and many like them, in effect defines democracy as a form of government. One in which there is a presumption that, in the last resort, power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a 'free' electoral system. The problem with this view of democracy is that there is an intrinsic hope that an open electoral system is concomitant with the wielding of power.

Of course, democratic government is seen as more than a free electoral system: a democratic society is also characterised by constitutional government, human rights, tolerance and equality before the law.

Democratic government has two main forms. First, the increasingly rare direct democracy, where everyone involved has a role in the decision-making. Second, representative democracy, where a person is elected in some way to represent the views of the constituency. Most democracies entirely distort the nature of representation via party politics, which means the election is of a package and that, once elected, the party member primarily represents the views of the party not the direct concerns of the constituency.

Further, without wanting to get into a protracted discussion of the nature of democracy, there is a growing fracture between electorate and government within democracies. As Jonathan Steele noted in (2002):

The thinning-out of western democracies, which have seen a long-term trend towards ever lower electoral turn-outs, is partly due to despair over low standards of executive accountability, but also to the failure of elected representatives to respond to many citizens' real concerns. By this measure...there is a continuum between the election [of Robert Mugabe] in Zimbabwe and the contest which ended with George W Bush in the White House... Both [involved]...flaws in compiling complete voters' rolls, excessive use of state and private finance to distort access to the media, low public faith in the relevance of the contest, and manipulation of the counting procedures.

So what are the issues here about democracy that relate to our concerns with quality assurance? Perhaps you can already see parallels.

First, democracy is not a simple concept, especially in practice. *Ideally*, it involves a process by which people ultimately govern themselves and intrinsically, involves a system of judicial fairness, tolerance for alternative views and the preservation of fundamental rights. In practice, the people hand over the process of governing to others. Party political systems mean that they hand over the process of legislation-making to a party albeit that the people can vote to change the party. However, this is the tip of the governing iceberg; there is a whole infrastructure

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<sup>1</sup> Professor at Copenhagen Business School and member of the Forum organising committee.

<sup>2</sup> Note, that the 'third-leg' of university activity, community engagement, is not addressed here as quality assurance processes do not, in the main, engage with that, rather they focus on research and teaching.

in most democracies that is not changed by the electoral system, such as the judiciary and the civil service. The governing executive is appointed by the elected leader not by the people. In many situations, a large proportion of the people do not take part in elections for one reason or another, not least because they feel disengaged from the process. Further, beneath all these layers of the democratic state, there are powerful elites who, at best, manipulate and, at worst, entirely disregard the democratic process: their power being vested in wealth and position rather than the democratic electoral process.

Does this start to chime with quality assurance? Is quality assurance a process controlled by the constituency? Is it something that the 'people' (in this case those within higher education institutions) feel able to engage with? Is it delegated to some other authority (either internal to the institution or external to it)? Is there tolerance, fairness a sense of rights preserved? Are there any elections? Does the power reside behind the scenes?

Most external quality assurance involves a government department or, more likely nowadays, an 'independent' agency, albeit usually set up by government and ultimately, if indirectly, responsible to the appropriate ministry. The purpose, approach, focus and methodology may or may not be enshrined in legislation or regulation but is usually specified in detail by the agency with or without consultation with the sector. The result is an imposed set of procedures. Higher education institutions are, through persuasion or direct sanction, required to comply with the procedures and take part in quality assurance processes. When the purpose of quality assurance is control of the sector, or checking compliance with government policy, or ensuring accountability (usually for taxpayers' money) and the methodology involves some form of inspection, albeit in the apparently benign form of peer review, then there is not much sign of democracy.

The whole edifice looks autocratic and from within universities feels autocratic. Perhaps that is the fate of quality assurance. However, should universities, which, through their social critical role, are at the heart of democracies, not also be subject to democratic evaluation of their own quality? Or is quality evaluation by its very nature autocratic?

There are attempts to soften the autocracy. Fitness for purpose is meant to enable institutions to identify their own mission and be checked against how well they fulfil self-imposed intentions. However, fitness for purpose is not so benign: underpinning all such systems are broader expectations that cut across the specific concerns of the institution. In some systems, of course, such as South Africa, this is directly systematised in the checking of the fitness of purpose of the institutional mission. A softening, therefore, that is a sham democratically.

The visiting peer-review team at the heart of the ubiquitous approach to quality assurance is another attempt to democratise quality assurance. Peers, it is argued, are insiders to the sector, provide insight, understand issues and are, therefore, supportive and sharing. An alternative view suggests that they are biased, prejudicial, and amateurish: evidence provided by people having been peer reviewed suggests that, rather than supportive, peers can be destructive and pernicious (Ceci & Peters, 1992; Westerheijden, 1990; Stensaker, 1998; Langfeldt, 2002).

So how can quality assurance be a more democratic process? The answer is not self-regulation. This does not work as has been spectacularly demonstrated in the financial sector. All social, political, scientific and economic sectors should be accountable in a democracy. But accountable 'downwards' to the people, or at least their 'stakeholders', not accountable 'upwards' to ministry or quango. Accountability does not have to be accounting to an autocratic bureaucracy.

The 'perfection' or 'consistency' approach to quality, encapsulated in some approaches to total quality management, for example, proposes a simple solution to democratisation: instead of checking output, everyone in the process is expected to be responsible for the quality of their own part of the production process. The emphasis is on ensuring that things are 'done right first time' (Crosby, 1979). When unsatisfactory outputs occur, the process is analysed so that corrections can be made to ensure that the problem does not recur. The notions of zero defects and getting things right first time involve a philosophy of prevention embodied in a quality culture. The emphasis is on 'democratising' quality by making everyone involved in a production process responsible. This approach has some appeal when there is a clear tangible product. However, when the outcome is the enhancement and empowerment of the student, who is not a product but a participant in a transformative learning experience, or the development of new ideas, concepts or paradigmatic development in science, there is no simple way of specifying the quality requirements at each stage of the process.



Maybe quality assurance, to become democratic, needs to focus not on external agendas but the internal agendas of higher education institutions. Perhaps an improvement purpose provides the basis for a more democratic approach. Perhaps a democratic quality assurance is one that starts with the key stakeholders and asks what they want and explores whether their expectations are fulfilled. Of course, agencies will say that is what, in effect, they do by proxy. One might be sceptical of such a stance. Agencies are increasingly sophisticated and efficient in their quality assurance approaches but democracy in quality assurance is not achieved by agencies pretending they constitute a democratic check on, for example, accountability.

Furthermore, governments (and agencies) should not pretend that accountability, control of the sector and compliance requirements constitute a basis for improvement. The linking of quality assurance with accountability, which has been the norm in so many countries, has seen a clear separation between those involved with innovation in learning and teaching and those engaged in developing quality management systems. While they continue to operate in separate realms, there is little hope for even a Crosbyesque approach to democratisation of quality through the establishment of quality culture let alone a fundamental shift from autocracy to democracy in the development of the quality of higher education.

Improvement -or enhancement- driven approaches to quality assurance provide the basis for a more democratic approach. The Scottish enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) is an approach that focuses on specific issues for improvement, encourages dialogue, sharing of good practice and works, in the main, in a democratic fashion from the bottom-up, albeit much of the quality work is delegated to 'representatives'. In this case the representatives are not elected but tend to be self-appointed by dint of their interest and enthusiasm in taking forward the higher education endeavour. The top-down steer is provided by the university pro-vice chancellors (academic), working through the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, who decide on the annual enhancement themes. A process that involves lengthy meetings and protracted debate before the participants come to an agreement.

Trawling the internet for material on democratising quality in higher education was rather fruitless. However, to my own surprise and not little embarrassment I found an article entitled 'Democratising quality', which I had presented at the *7th Conference on Assessment in Higher Education* of the American Association for Higher Education in June 1992. The paper noted:

Accountability was at the heart of the concern with quality in British Higher Education in the 1980s.... The British government expected a clearer account of public monies consumed by higher education...and a realignment of outputs to cater for the needs of industry.... Along with funding cuts in other sectors, the government demanded more 'value for money' from higher education institutions (Cave *et al*, 1990). In essence, this meant applying pressure on institutions to increase student numbers without a commensurate increase in funding.... As student numbers rose the concern with quality intensified. On the one hand there was a general concern among those working and studying in higher education that the quality of the education being provided was suffering as a result of the increased student numbers. Meanwhile the government, via the funding councils, was using 'quality' as a means of further encouraging polytechnics to increase numbers [and hence income]. (Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992, p. 1)

The main concerns of the paper were 'how will quality be assessed? Who will do the assessing and what methodology will be applied to assessing the quality of provision of a higher education institution?' The proposed external quality assurance methodology, at that time, caused some concern in institutions as it 'involves outside assessors going into institutions and, among other things, observing what takes place in teaching and learning situations'. The paper reported on the progress of the *Quality in Higher Education Project* (a multi-agency-backed project in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s) which set out to identify the nature of quality, assess the perceptions of different stakeholders and attempt to identify a flexible and dynamic methodology that will take account of the disparate perspectives and ever changing circumstances. The paper regarded the first step to democratisation as the gathering of information about quality criteria.

The QHE research has attempted to democratise the concept of quality in higher education. Quality, like 'freedom' or 'justice' is an elusive concept. We all have an intuitive understanding of what it means but it is often hard to articulate. It is also a relative concept in that it means different things to different people in different contexts and in relation to different purposes. Rather than simply adopt an 'official' view of quality we wanted to try and discover what different 'stakeholders' regard as important criteria for assessing the quality of higher education. We thus surveyed the views of those 'stakeholders' whose views are less frequently expressed: students, staff, and employers. We intended to compare the views of these groups and to relate them to the documented priorities of government, funding councils, accrediting bodies and assessment agencies. Our aim is to find out the views on quality of each of these groups... (Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992, p. 3)

Democratising quality assurance in 1992 was construed as exploring the views of those at the learning and teaching interface and the views of those people who were going to be employing graduates. This project, in the early years of quality assurance, naïvely hoped to impact on subsequent national approaches unaware that rationalism would be overturned by political pragmatism (albeit that in the United Kingdom the project did persuade civil servants to think beyond the classroom when assessing higher education teaching quality). Nonetheless, this early attempt at democratising quality is not so far from the re-emergent approaches that have shifted the emphasis from external to internal quality assurance, system to culture and from accountability to enhancement. These are starting to think about quality as a substantive enterprise driven by particular concerns about improvement rather than generic concerns about system. Particular concerns that, in the realm of learning and teaching, are contingent on the engagement, enthusiasm and enterprise of students and staff at the learning interface, enabled by managers who provide the context, the encouragement and the necessary support for pedagogic innovators and risk takers. The same enabling framework also applies for the quality of cutting-edge research.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of material over the last decade that discusses the democratisation of quality in higher education reveals how little concern there has been in developing an inclusive quality assurance approach. It is arguable that, instead of pushing for democracy, the default mode for academics confronted with an autocratic edifice is resistance, whether through direct obstruction or more frequently indirect distortion, revision or disengagement (Newton, 2008).

It is argued that universities are bastions of democracy through their social critical role. Further, that role is manifest in their educational quality. Giroux (2008, pp. 18–19) noted:

As a political and moral practice, education must be engaged not only as one of the primary conditions for constructing political and moral agents, but also as a public pedagogy—produced in a range of sites and public spheres—that constitutes cultural practice as a defining feature of any viable notion of politics. Education after Abu Ghraib must imagine a future in which learning is inextricably connected to social change, the obligations of civic justice, and a notion of democracy in which peace, equality, compassion, and freedom are not limited to the nation state but extended to the international community.

Suddenly, the argument in this paper has been propelled into another realm. This is no longer democratisation of the quality assurance it is quality education as a democratising process. Democratising in the fundamental sense of democracy: as encapsulating power in the people, tolerance, fundamental rights and egalitarianism, especially before the law (rather than democracy construed as an electoral system). Giroux's analysis draws on an earlier essay by Adorno in which he argues for the democratic power of education. Although a Marxist, Adorno was also an elitist, reinforced by the horrors of World War Two, which led him not to trust uneducated populism. Adorno argued for education as a moral and political force against human injustice and Giroux's analysis of the Iraq war and its aftermath is a timely reminder of the critical core of higher education.

Adorno's distrust of populism stemmed from the easy manipulation of the population. Not wanting in any way to demean Adorno's powerful work by comparison to this paper, nor to draw any close parallels between the critique of fascism (and consequent need for education to avoid such future devastating manipulation of the population) and quality assurance, there are distant echoes. There is a monster lurking in the wings that has populist appeal, is easily manipulated, provides a distorted view and claims unwarranted attention. This is, of course, ranking. It provides an insidious form of accountability, maximising its populist appeal by emphasising its deceptively simple idea of university status. Rankings are arbitrary, misleading and theoretically bankrupt but that appears only to boost their standing with politicians and the public, fed by a stupendously uncritical media. The real problem with rankings is not their distorting effect but the desire, by those who should know better in higher education institutions, to want to climb league tables. As a result they pursue strategies that have little to do with transformational learning; developing critical reflective learners gains you no points on the world ranking lists (Harvey, 2008). Rankings are fundamentally undemocratic, not as a form of quality assurance but because they inhibit the democratising quality of higher education.

So 'democratising quality' is in part a plea for a more democratic approach to quality assurance, to one that prioritises and enables substantive and specific, bottom-up improvement rather than autocratic generic accountability, control or compliance monitoring. However, it is more than a concern with quality assurance procedures as such, it is about what the outcome of those procedures might be and 'democratising quality' is shorthand for a desire for an empowering and enhancing transformative quality higher education that underpins the fundamental elements of democracy.

## **The emperor has no clothes? Rankings and the shift from quality assurance to world-class excellence**

*Ellen Hazelkorn<sup>1</sup>*

Ranking of higher education institutions (HEI) has, arguably, become the performance assessment mechanism we have all learned to hate – but the issues are more complex than most critical commentary suggests. If higher education is to succeed internationally then it will need to up its game about quality. One measure of quality is the ability to attract international students. If rankings are a manifestation of global competition for talent, then they can also be seen as a measure of quality or world-class excellence.

How has this situation come about? Why have rankings become so popular that both governments and HEIs use them as a mark of ambition and pre-eminence? What impact is the global reputation race having on higher education? How is higher education responding to the challenges of global competition? What are the policy options?

The following comments and observations are based on research conducted in association with OECD, IAU and Institute of Higher Education Policy (with funding from the Lumina Foundation) over the past several years (Hazelkorn, 2007, 2008, 2009).

### ***Why rankings?***

Because knowledge is now widely acknowledged as the foundation of economic growth, social development and national competitiveness, higher education and HE research now top the policy agenda. But if HE is central to the economy, then its productivity, quality and status becomes a vital indicator of international competitiveness. Yet, many countries face demographic problems as evidenced by the greying of the population and retirement of professionals combined with a decline in the number of students choosing science and technology subjects. This is occurring at a time when the Lisbon Strategy aspires to make Europe ‘the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world’. Key elements of this strategy involve increasing investment in R&D and doubling the number of PhD students. Accordingly, the benefits of (cultural) diversity for innovation and skill shortages are triggering initiatives to increase high-skilled immigration including international students, who are widely acknowledged to make a significant contribution to a country’s R&D efforts (OECD, 2007, p34). Today, the ‘battle for talent’ or ‘scramble for students’ now complements more traditional struggles for natural resources. In this context, global competition is reflected in the rising significance of rankings as a measure of the knowledge producing or a talent catching capacity of higher education.

While rankings have become very popular in recent years, they have existed – in the United States – for a long time. *US News and World Report* began providing consumer-type information about US universities in 1983. Since then national rankings have been created in over 40 countries. Global rankings may be more recent but they are also more influential; the Shanghai Jiao Tong *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (henceforth SJT) began in 2003 and the Times QS *World University Ranking* in 2004. Today, there is an obsession with rankings – being the subject of political statements, HE strategic statements and media coverage. Their results are covered widely in the popular press; indeed news organisations are one of the main promoters or developers of rankings. The focus of attention is primarily on the status of the top 100 universities, despite the fact that (according to the International Association of Universities) there are over 17,000 HEIs in the world.

Their popularity has risen because they are perceived to provide independent information about the quality and performance of higher education. However, because higher education is now seen as the motor of the economy, global rankings have acquired an even more significant value. They appear to order global knowledge, by

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<sup>1</sup> Director of Research and Enterprise, and Dean of the Graduate Research School, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland and Director of the Higher Education Policy Research Unit (HEPRU).

hierarchically arranging the biggest and most prestigious producers of knowledge. In this respect, rankings are perceived as providing a gauge of international competitiveness which is measured by the number of HEIs in the top 20, 50 or 100. Yet, in many instances there is a gap between ambition and the rank of national HEIs. The first SJT in 2003 identified only 10 European universities among the top 50 compared with 35 for the US – in contrast to the ambitions of the Lisbon Strategy. Thus, regardless of whether HEIs are large or small, old and new, globally facing or regionally based, all HEIs have been drawn into the global higher education marketplace.

As a consequence, many governments around the world are reviewing the structure and organisation of their HE systems. In contrast to previous perceptions that higher education fails to attract sufficient policy attention, this demonstrates that this is no longer the case. But, being at the centre of policy, with increased funding and autonomy comes at a price. That price is greater accountability, more efficiency, better value-for-money, curriculum reform, modernisation of the organisation and processes, new governance models, and greater emphasis on productivity and quality assurance. In other words, more output which is measurable, comparable and at world-class standard.

Global rankings are essentially the latest step in a trend for greater transparency and accountability beginning with college guides which have been popular in the US, UK and Australia for several decades. These provided descriptive qualitative information about HEIs for students and parents to help inform their choice. This market has grown because of the importance attached to an HE qualification for future career opportunities and quality of life. While accreditation procedures have always assessed the quality of what HEIs deliver, over the last decades these processes have acquired more formality, and the results have become public – sometimes published in the newspapers. The focus is usually on teaching and learning and/or research, either at the subject/discipline level but also at the institutional level. Benchmarking has transformed these processes into a strategic tool, helping HE leaders and governments to compare systematically the practice and performance with peer institutions or countries. National rankings are another type of performance assessment mechanism, and their results are often used to speed up change and modernisation, strategic planning and quality improvement. Global rankings were the next logical step; in a globalised world, cross-national comparisons are a product whose time has come.

### ***Do rankings measure quality?***

Rankings compare HEIs using a range of different indicators, which are weighed differently according to each ranking system. In other words, the choice of indicators and the weightings attached to them are not value-free but reflect the priorities of the producers. Information is generally drawn from three different sources: 1) independent third party sources, e.g. government databases; 2) HEI sources or 3) survey data of students, employers or other stakeholders.

The most influential rankings are the SJT<sup>2</sup> and the Times QS *World University Ranking* which began in 2004<sup>3</sup>. More recently, Cybermetrics Lab in Spain created *Webometrics* in 2004 to compare the size and scale of HE web presence<sup>4</sup>, and in 2007 the Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan established the *Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities*<sup>5</sup>. The latter attempts to correct for institutional size and age, which is also a goal of the *Leiden Ranking* which is produced by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) which uses its own bibliometric indicators<sup>6</sup>. As mentioned earlier, there are many national rankings but the most influential are the *CHE-HochschulRanking* (Germany)<sup>7</sup>, *US News and World Report* (US)<sup>8</sup> and the *Sunday Times University Guide* (UK)<sup>9</sup>. There are also discipline-specific rankings, most notably for business, law and medical schools/universities.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/rank/2003/2003main.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.topuniversities.com/worlduniversityrankings/methodology/simple\\_overview/](http://www.topuniversities.com/worlduniversityrankings/methodology/simple_overview/)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.webometrics.info/methodology.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://ranking.heeact.edu.tw/en-us/2008/Page/Methodology>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cwts.nl/ranking/LeidenRankingWebSite.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.daad.de/deutschland/hochschulen/hochschulranking/06543.en.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/college/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://extras.timesonline.co.uk/stug/universityguide.php>

Table 1 below indicates how different rankings measure similar activities differently. The SJT and Taiwan rankings focus exclusively on research. The Times QS is slightly broader in scope, but assuming that peer appraisal is actually a reputational survey – of which a key element is probably based on research reputation – it could be argued that the three rankings are compatible – and their results would tend to reflect this similarity. Table 2 shows how different rankings, in this example national systems, choose different indicators to measure research. The clear lesson from these two tables is that despite the common term, rankings differ considerably and do not necessarily measure what the user thinks they are measuring.

<b>RANKING SYSTEM</b>	<b>INDICATOR DIMENSION</b>	<b>WEIGHTING</b>
SJT Academic Ranking of World Universities	Quality of Education	10%
	Quality of Faculty	
	• No. Nobel Prize/Field Medal	20%
	• No. HiCi Researchers	20%
	Research Output	
	• No. Articles in Nature/Science	20%
	• No. Articles in Citation Index	20%
	Size of Institution	10%
Times QS World University Ranking	Peer Appraisal	40%
	Graduate Employability	10%
	Teaching Quality/SSR	20%
	International Students	5%
	International Faculty	5%
	Research Quality/Citations per Faculty	20%
Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for Research Universities	Research Productivity	
	• No. Articles in last 11 years	10%
	• No. Articles in current year	10%
	Research Impact	
	• No. Citations in last 11 years	10%
	• No. Citations in last 2 years	10%
	• Avr. no Citations in last 11 years	10%
	Research Excellence	
	• HiCi index of last 2 years	20%
	• No. HiCi Papers, last 10 years	10%
• No. Articles in High-Impact Journals in Current Year	10%	
• No. of Subject Fields where University Demonstrates Excellence	10%	

Table 1. Comparing What Rankings Measure  
(Source: SJT, Times QS, and Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan)

INDICATORS USED FOR RESEARCH	RANKING SYSTEM (COUNTRY)
Overall grants (money amount)	Slovakia
Grants per faculty (money amount)	Austria, Germany, Italy
Grants per faculty (absolute numbers)	Italy
Research projects funded by EU	Italy
Participation in int'l research programmes	Poland
No. of publications	Sweden
Publications per researcher	Germany, Slovakia, Switzerland
Citations per faculty	UK
Citations per publication	Germany, Slovakia, Switzerland
No. of int'l publications	Poland
% articles cited within 1 <sup>st</sup> two years after publication	Sweden
No. of publications with 5+ citations	Slovakia
% articles belonging to top 5% most cited articles (HiCi)	Sweden
No. of patents (absolute number)	Germany
Patents per faculty	Germany
Ratio of pg research students	UK
Research quality	Germany, UK
Reputation for research	Austria, Germany

*Table 2. Measuring Research*  
(Source: Hendel and Stolz, 2008, p. 181)

While HE guides were originally produced to help students, and their parents, make informed choices about an undergraduate education, the audience today is much broader. This is especially true for global rankings. Even the results of research assessment exercises, e.g. the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) or the German Excellence Initiative have effectively come to be perceived and used as a ranking. As the number of rankings grows, the audience has expanded to include international postgraduate (PhD) students and faculty, other HEIs and HE organisations, government and policymakers, employers, sponsors and private investors and industrial partners. The public and public opinion, through the publicity given to rankings, are influenced by rankings which in turn can (positively or perversely) affect public support for higher education. The latter can be particularly significant for HEIs which rely significantly on public funding.

The debate about rankings has to date primarily focused on the indicators used and their suitability as proxies, whether it is possible to measure and compare complex diverse HEIs with different missions and contexts, and the bias attached to the choice and weightings of indicators. Because rankings rely on quantitative data, they rely on that which can be (easily) measured rather than that which might be most appropriate. The choice of data has implications for the methodology and the results. For example, because the only publicly available cross-national data is drawn from bibliometric and citation databases means there is an in-built bias in favour of bio-medical research in the SJT. In contrast the Times QS uses a combination of peer review and questionnaires in an attempt to measure broader HE activity, e.g. peer assessment, student learning and employer perceptions. But its small sample size has prompted criticism. Reliance on bibliometric databases and citations has raised questions about inherent bias in both Thompson ISI and Scopus against the arts, humanities and social sciences (albeit the latter is slightly better in this regard), and whether citations measure impact beyond a relatively select group of 'tribal' academics, and the extent to which self-referencing is significant. There is a further concern about the English language bias. While the humanities and social sciences argue the relevance of the national language for the discipline others say that whether we like it or not, English is the language of world science.

Indicators act as proxies for what is really being measured. For example, *US News and World Report* uses student entry scores to measure how selective an HEI is. In other words, does the HEI accept everyone or only a proportion of applicants? It is often assumed that the more selective an HEI is seen to be, the better it is. Citations and publications measure academic quality, sometimes used or perceived as the equivalent as teaching quality.

Likewise, the number of Nobel prizes or similar awards measure academic excellence. The size of the institutional budget and library resources may be used to measure the quality of the infrastructure. Some systems measure employability as a proxy for the quality of the graduates. While each of these indicators provides some useful information, they can equally distort the interpretation or behaviour. Employability indexes may be a function of regional or wider economic factors; likewise mounting evidence from the US illustrates that student selectivity can be manipulated while it also discourages HEIs from widening access.

Can rankings genuinely measure reputation or are they simply a self-fulfilling prophecy which is self-perpetuating? This is one of the main criticisms against the Times QS peer survey which asks academics around the world to identify the top HEIs. Concern has been expressed about what is called 'rater bias' or 'halo effect' – because someone knows an institution as good it must be good for everything. The example usually cited is Princeton University's Law School which has been ranked highly – except Princeton does not have a Law School. The CHE ranking asks academics to assess the teaching quality of peers, but it is not clear how someone can know about a colleague's teaching ability. Reputational surveys are susceptible to 'gaming' in other ways. There is evidence of respondents deliberately downgrading competitors, and students – with or without faculty encouragement – upgrading their assessment because of the perceived link between institutional rank and employment/career opportunities.

Finally, is there a single definition of quality? And, is it possible to measure and compare HEIs as a whole? At a time of growing diversity of mission and providers, rankings use a common system to measure all HEIs. Many critics argue this is norming higher education. Because global rankings focus on research intensity, teaching and learning, community engagement, third mission and innovation, social and economic impact, etc. are ignored. In addition, HEIs are complex organisations with strengths and weaknesses across various departments and activities. An aggregate score is unable to reflect this. Because the complexity of higher education is reduced to a final 'score' which is a single digit, institutional differences are exaggerated. Ratings or banding has been suggested as a possible way around this particular problem. Ultimately, there is a concern that rankings validate a 'one size fits all' model of higher education, which undermines the fact that HEIs have different missions and provide diverse HE learning and research experiences and contributions. Excellence can be defined differently depending upon the criteria – or indicators/weightings – used.

### ***How are rankings impacting on higher education?***

Despite all the concerns and the issues raised about rankings, HEIs are compelled to take the results very seriously. In response to an international survey, 58% of respondents said they were unhappy with their current rank, and 93% and 82% said they wanted to improve their national or international ranking, respectively. Seventy per cent expressed a desire to be in the top 10% nationally, and 71% in the top 25% internationally – a mathematical impossibility (Hazelkorn, 2007).

Evidence drawn from research which I have conducted and from other international studies illustrates that rankings have a profound impact and influence on institutional behaviour and academic decision-making. The following discussion highlights the impact on particular stakeholder groups.

1) Students are particularly vulnerable to rankings. There are four different sub-groups. Domestic undergraduate students are most likely to rely on local intelligence and attend an HEI which is geographically close. However, mobility is on the rise particularly among high achievers and it is the high achiever group that is most desirable. Domestic postgraduate students are increasingly more (internationally) mobile and sensitive to rankings – having become acquainted with them while at college/university. International undergraduates are a special category, and include students who are on an Erasmus/junior year abroad programme. The largest market is international postgraduates, especially PhD students. Hence, this is key focus for international recruitment, as most HE International Offices would attest. These students are highly receptive to global rankings, and in some instances, scholarships and future employment depend on it.

There is growing international evidence: 40% of US students use news magazine rankings, and 11% said rankings were an important factor influencing their choice (McDonough et al 1997, 1998). Rankings are particularly crucial



for above-average students who are likely to make choices based non-financial factors, e.g. reputation (Spies 1978). In the UK, 61% of students referred to rankings before making their choice, and 70% considered they were important/very important (Roberts, 2007, 20), while 60% of prospective German students 'know rankings and use rankings as one source of information among others' (Federkeil, 2007).

In the US, above average or high achieving students and their parents make choices that are based on non-financial factors, e.g. reputation. Rankings are used as a barometer. Similarly, students who are able to pay full fees – in other words, those not on a scholarship – are likely to attend higher ranked college (even by a few places). While the US experience may be unique, it has also been exposed to the influence of rankings for the longest time and that experience is noteworthy. There is some evidence that students in binary systems may be migrating out of what are perceived as lower status institutions. And because, student selectivity is an important metric (see above), HEIs are adjusting their selection practices accordingly – preferring to recruit high SAT scored students rather than implement their access policies.

2) Employers are also influenced by rankings – and more information is becoming available about their increasing interest in rankings. To date, many employers have had their own implicit view as to which institutions are best. On campus recruitment at particular campuses, often termed the 'milk run', has been a tradition for decades in the US and UK. Large corporations have a more systematic approach than do SMEs. A UK study showed that employers favoured graduates from highly ranked institutions: 25% cited league tables as the basis on which they made their decision (University of Sussex, 2006, 87, 80, also 87-92). Boeing has recently announced that it will begin to rank HEIs on the basis of graduate success. It said it preferred its own view about what was happening rather than taking biased views coming from institutions (Baskin, 2008).

3) Academic and industry partners are another growing user group. According to the international survey (Hazelkorn, 2007), HEIs use rankings to help determine which institutions to partner with. Because international global partnerships are now a strategically important feature of academic and research collaboration, and are often used as a measure of the quality of research proposals, HEIs are looking carefully before venturing into partnership arrangements. Formerly, student exchanges were considered to be making a valuable contribution to the learning experience; they are now increasingly displaced by more strategic deliberations as reflected in the growing importance of global HE networks. Indeed, 57% of respondents said rankings were influencing other HEIs to partner with them, and 34% said they felt rankings were influencing the willingness of HEIs to accept their membership of academic or professional organisations.

Similarly industry is beginning to use rankings to influence their decisions about academic partnership and philanthropy. Deutsche Telecom admits it used rankings to influence its decision about professorial chairs (Spiewak quoted in van Raan, 2007, 94), and Boeing said it will be using performance data to determine 'which colleges... share in the \$100-million that [it] spends... on course work and supplemental training' (Baskin, 2008).

4) Government decisions are also susceptible to rankings. It has already been noted that politicians commonly use the rank of HEIs to demonstrate national competitiveness in much the same way that 'trophy wives' are displayed. More seriously, rankings are influencing policy views at the system level, as illustrated by the German Excellence Initiative and recent changes in French high education. The EU decision, under the French Presidency, to develop a Global University Ranking follows concern about the perceived poor standing of European universities vis-à-vis US counterparts. The example of the Malaysian government, which established a Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate why rankings of two top universities fell by almost 100 places within a year, has been well-documented (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007, 40). Macedonia is the first country to recognise legislatively, for accreditation purposes, qualification from HEIs ranked among the top 500 in the Times QS, SJT or USN&WR. But rankings are also influencing policy beyond higher education. Dutch immigration law is now targeting immigrants from particular HEIs ranked 150 or better – a decision that is likely to be copied.

5) Changes have been evident, over many years, in academic work practices. Rankings are a recent driver of this change because of the importance now attached to research productivity and quality. Many HEIs are actively head-hunting high achievers with high-citation status (HiCi). Use of performance measurements or performance-based pay may be a relatively recent phenomenon in many countries, but there is a close correlation between

the indicators used in both. Some HEIs are also using rankings to identify poor or under achievers. This can affect faculty morale, and management of this new human resource environment is a critical challenge for HE leaders.

But, faculty are not innocent victims. Faculty from high ranking institutions and those who desire to be in high ranking institutions, are very conscious about the professional capital that rankings transmit.

Given most faculty in postsecondary institutions teach and usually engage in public service, research is the activity that differentiates among institutions [and individual faculty], conferring high status and prestige (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997, p. 117).

Those who rise to the top of the academic league table accumulate 'research power' (Marginson and Considine, 2000) and can be well rewarded in the deregulated academic labour market. Not surprisingly, some academics say they are cautious about entering research partnerships with colleagues in lower or not-ranked HEIs, while others pursue strategies to rank in journals.

How are the institutions responding? According to the 2006 survey (Hazelkorn, 2007), 63% of HE leaders said they were taking action in response to rankings. The overwhelming majority took strategic or academic decisions; only 8% indicated they had taken no action. This compares sharply with an earlier study from the US, when 20% of university presidents said they ignored rankings. Table 3 provides an overview of the types of actions pursued by HEIs, drawing a relation between the actions and weighting of particular indicators in either the SJT or Times QS Ranking. While many of these changes could have been introduced for normal competitive, rationalisation or sound academic reasons, there is a strong correlation between them. The biosciences benefit vis-à-vis the arts or humanities because of their track record in research earnings and requirements but their output is more highly

	<b>Examples of Actions</b>	<b>Approximate Weighting</b>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase output, quality and citations</li> <li>• Reward faculty for publications in highly-cited journals</li> <li>• Publish in English-language journals</li> <li>• Set individual targets for faculty and departments</li> </ul>	SJT = 40% Times = 20%
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merge with another institution, or bring together discipline complementary departments</li> <li>• Incorporate autonomous institutes into host HEI</li> <li>• Establish Centres-of-Excellence &amp; Graduate Schools</li> <li>• Develop/expand English-language facilities, international student facilities, laboratories, dormitories</li> <li>• Establish Institutional Research capability</li> </ul>	SJT = 40% Times = 20%
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harmonise with EU/US models</li> <li>• Favour science/bio-science disciplines</li> <li>• Discontinue programmes/activities which negatively affect performance</li> <li>• Grow postgraduate activity relative to undergraduate</li> <li>• Positively affect student/staff ratio (SSR)</li> <li>• Improve teaching quality</li> </ul>	SJT = 10% Times = 20%
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Target recruitment of high-achieving students, esp. PhD</li> <li>• Offer attractive merit scholarships and other benefits</li> <li>• More international activities and exchange programmes</li> <li>• Open international office</li> </ul>	Times = 15%
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit/head-hunt international high-achieving/HiCi scholars</li> <li>• Create new contract/tenure arrangements</li> <li>• Set market-based or performance/merit based salaries</li> <li>• Reward high-achievers</li> <li>• Identify weak performers</li> </ul>	SJT = 40% Times = 25%
Public Image/ Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalise Admissions, Marketing and Public Relations</li> <li>• Ensure common brand used on all publications</li> <li>• Advertisements in <i>Nature and Science</i> and other high focus journals</li> <li>• Expand internationalisation alliances and membership of global networks</li> </ul>	Times = 40%

Table 3. Mapping Institutions Actions against Rankings (Source: Hazelkorn, 2009)

rewarded in rankings nonetheless. High-achieving students are highly prized because they complete in a timely fashion and progress more readily to employment – which are often key metrics. Not only governments – as mentioned above – but HEIs have examined strategic options to merge based on the ranking premium.

### ***Moving beyond institutional rankings***

Rankings are having both a positive and perverse effect on higher education. They have introduced a new competitive dynamic into the higher education environment, forcing all HEIs – almost regardless of mission and context – into the global marketplace. In so doing, they have created a sense of urgency, accelerating the modernisation agenda. Despite criticism, rankings are forcing higher education to prioritise institutional performance and quality, thereby enhancing public accountability and transparency. Just as no restaurant wants to be placed at the bottom of the list for poor hygiene, so also ‘league tables’ compel HEIs to respond. A survey conducted by the Australian National Union of Students on HEI treatment of student representation provoked an immediate response by Vice-Chancellors whose universities were listed at or near the bottom.

The focus or preoccupation with world-class excellence is accentuating vertical and hierarchical differentiation, and widening the gap between mass and elite higher education. It is facilitating the formation of global networks of HEIs which aim to maximise their collective capability and reputation, and hence their knowledge-producing and talent-catching capabilities. We are familiar with associations such as Universitas 21 or the Coimbra group, but the EHEA and ERA have similar objectives: creating a common HE space to enhance academic collaboration in teaching/learning and research for the benefit of members and society. The ASEAN countries have sought to establish a similar HE space. These developments are helping reshape higher education on a global level, aligning national and institutional priorities. Ultimately these developments are challenging governments and HEIs to (re)think about the role and purpose of mass higher education, and how and what should be measured.

At a policy level, rankings are seen as an indicator of higher education performance, and are linked increasingly to resource allocation. Governments around the world are considering how best to improve the quality, productivity and efficiency of higher education. Restructuring the system, concentrating resources in a small number of elite HEIs or ‘centres of excellence’, and fostering greater mission differentiation are common policy strategies. These actions are also linked to improving visibility, status and reputation.

At an international level, several supra-governmental projects have emerged as a response to the prominence and critique of the SJT and Times QS rankings. As an antidote to the preoccupation with research, the OECD AHELO project (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) is examining the possibility of measuring/ comparing teaching and learning, similar to the PISA project<sup>10</sup>. The EU classification project aims to establish a typology of European HEIs, similar to the Carnegie Classification Project, which will define common characteristics of peer HEIs and enable more appropriate benchmarking<sup>11</sup>. The recent announcement of a European/Global Ranking of Universities is arguably the next step in this process<sup>12</sup>. Parallel to these developments, DG Research has established an Expert Group on the Assessment of University-based Research<sup>13</sup>.

Some of the actions described above – by governments and HEIs – suggest there is a single appropriate response to the challenges that global rankings pose. However, rather than elevating individual HEIs to world-class status, debate should be focused on building world class HE systems. Instead of concentrating resources into a small number of elite HEIs, the aim should be to build a diverse, horizontal set of high performing globally-focused institutions which provide excellence across diverse fields of learning and discovery, impacting economically and socially. Learning from the strategies of successful mega-regions, innovation clusters, Mode 2 research networks and biodiversity, a strategy for a *World Class HE System* would develop a portfolio of HEIs and research institutes innovatively interacting with business, enterprise and society to attract international students and researchers, and maximize collective capability beyond individual capacity.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_35961291\\_40624662\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.htm](http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3343,en_2649_35961291_40624662_1_1_1_1,00.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.u-map.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/1942&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

<sup>13</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/detail.cfm?ref=2156&l=all>

Rather than generating an unsustainable reputation race, emphasis on world class systems focuses on higher education's contribution to the intellectual, social and economic fabric of society that sustains culture and democracy. It also challenges the view that knowledge is only created in elite universities, that innovation only happens in S&T disciplines, and that impact is measured only by the citation index. As a consequence, the ranking of higher education systems, for example The Lisbon Council University Systems Ranking. Citizens and Society in the Age of Knowledge<sup>14</sup> and QS SAFE - National System Strength Rankings<sup>15</sup>, are likely to become more prevalent in the future. And, in the current global economic and financial environment, this approach is more important than ever.

### **Conclusion**

Whether we like it or not, rankings have taken on a QA function and are equated with excellence. This is evidenced by the growing number of user groups – beyond the original target audience for college guides. It now includes a wide range of stakeholders who use rankings to inform decisions and opinions. As a consequence, rankings incentivise and influence behaviour, and more attention is being given by higher education to issues of quality and performance, and to benchmarking. As a result, changes are being made – positively and perversely – to the curriculum, to research priorities, and to the organisation. A world-class university is estimated to cost approximately \$1.5-\$2b per year. Pursuing this strategy only makes sense if the indicators and metrics are appropriate and the funding is available, otherwise governments and HEIs risk subverting other social and economic policy objectives. Building a *World Class HE System* would enable countries to mobilise and amplify the potential of the whole system for the benefit of society at large.

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<sup>14</sup> 2008, [http://www.lisboncouncil.net/media/lisbon\\_council\\_policy\\_brief\\_usr2008.pdf](http://www.lisboncouncil.net/media/lisbon_council_policy_brief_usr2008.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.topuniversities.com/index.php?id=1925>

## 2. QUALITY ASSURANCE ON THE MOVE

### Developments to encourage quality enhancement: a case study

Kath Hodgson<sup>1</sup>

*How can an institution ensure that effective quality enhancement takes place in an environment where the rules and regulation of quality assurance are seen by many academic staff as discouraging such activity? Can the restructuring of the central support teams really make the difference or does restructuring need to be undertaken in a broader context of cultural change within an institution? This case study provides a possible answer.*

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 set up the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and required it, amongst other duties, 'to secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education' in institutions of higher education. (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992, s.70) From 1997 this has been the responsibility of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This innovation, with its emphasis on audit and assessment, was not greeted with enthusiasm in universities. The putting together of information required as part of quality assurance processes, particularly for Audits and Reviews, was, and to a large extent still is, seen as particularly irksome – a time consuming bureaucratic collecting of data.

The measuring of quality was seen by many academic staff as holding back improvement. There were those who argued that there was too much emphasis on getting a good result and that this made it more difficult to use assessments to bring about real improvements. (Newton, 2002, p. 39-61) Gosling and D'Andrea had raised similar questions in 2001. 'Has the expansion of ever more intrusive quality assurance procedures resulted in an equivalent enhancement of the quality of student outcomes?' (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001, p. 7-17) They suggested that typically staff charged with quality development/enhancement in universities were distinct from those with responsibility for seeing that the demands of quality assurance are addressed. They saw a need 'for a quality system that not only performs a regulatory function but one that functions to improve the quality of the educational experience...' (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001, p. 11)

These concerns were also recognised officially. In 2002, HEFCE established a Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee 'to review arrangements that support the enhancement of quality in learning and teaching in higher education'. (HEFCE: Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee Interim Report, 2002) The QAA gave detailed attention to the part that evidence of enhancement should play in their national processes. That it should play a significant role was acknowledged but it proved difficult for institutions to accept as they still focussed on the previous experience of reviews at subject level. Following the demise of Subject Review the inclusion of Discipline Audit Trails in the institutional level review process did nothing to dispel this view. Even the QAA document series 'Learning from Audit', which was a clear attempt to provide guidance for institutions on enhancement, was viewed sceptically by many academic staff.

In 2006 a new scheme for audits was introduced which incorporated a change of approach giving explicit focus to enhancement. The change was reflected in the statement that the 'aim of QAA is to support and not undermine institutions in their work to enhance the learning opportunities they make available for students.' (QAA: Handbook for Institutional Audit, 2006, p. 1) QAA Audit teams are now charged with exploring explicitly an institution's strategy for enhancement. For the purpose of audits, enhancement is regarded by QAA as 'the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'. (QAA: Handbook for Institutional Audit, 2006, p. 1) The aim of the change was helped by the decision to discontinue any subject level engagement.

These changes are important but the view at institutional level, particularly amongst academic staff, of audits and quality assurance as a bureaucratic time-consuming collection of data and paperwork will not change quite so easily. To this end, it can be argued, that to facilitate change at institutional level amongst academic staff, those

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responsible for work associated with quality should not be seen as part of the management concerned only with getting good results. Instead they should be seen as colleagues who work with academic staff and are accepted by them. They must be seen to have a good knowledge and understanding of academic work and of the nature of learning and teaching. (Hodgson and Whalley, 2006) A recent joint report by the QAA, HEFCE and HEA indicates that many institutions are now making or planning changes to their arrangements for quality enhancement and in particular to the offices which support it. (HEA: Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?, 2008) Whilst it is important that staff in quality units understand the demands of quality assurance, they must also be able to ensure that the quality assurance processes do not hinder but in fact assist in an institution's concern to enhance its provision and further its mission.

In common with other universities, the University of Leeds has always sought to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities, without necessarily using the word 'enhancement'. It was done in a number of ways – directly through academic staffs' work with students and indirectly through the establishment of units and the appointment of staff with appropriate responsibilities and expertise in 'quality'.

At the University of Leeds the work associated with quality assurance was managed by an office in the central administration. In preparation for the first HEQC Institutional Review, the University established a small central unit, consisting of two administrative staff supported by two clerical staff. In addition to managing the Institutional Review, the unit supported taught courses committees which oversaw the quality assurance process of approving programmes. Following the introduction by the QAA of the programme of reviews at the subject level, the unit also managed these reviews. The unit had no other links with learning and teaching and was set up essentially to help achieve the best possible outcome from external reviews. It focussed on ensuring that schools could demonstrate adherence to University and QAA requirements during Teaching Quality Assessments. This purpose was clear from its title – the Teaching Quality Assessment Unit. Consideration of the quality of teaching and the student experience were considered only in the context of maximising scores. The enhancement of learning and teaching was supported separately by a small staff development team and a Flexible Learning Development Unit which had emerged from the national Enterprise Initiative.

In 1998, a new Director of the Teaching Quality Assessment Unit (TQAU) was appointed who proposed to the University's Teaching and Learning Board that not least in view of national developments, a change in emphasis in the TQAU's role should be considered – essentially that it be concerned with enhancement and not solely with quality assurance. In 1999 it was agreed that the TQAU would become the Quality Management and Enhancement Unit (QMEU). The unit would retain the important role of helping schools maximise performance in external reviews but would also begin the sharing and developing of good practice in learning and teaching across the University. QMEU assumed responsibility for encouraging faculty-level committees to look explicitly at how provision could be enhanced without ignoring quality assurance. This latter move was encouraged by changes to the titles and terms of reference of the committees: the Faculty Taught Courses Committees became the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees and at the University level, the Teaching and Learning Board became the Learning and Teaching Board. These were apparently trivial changes but ones which symbolised a new emphasis on all aspects of the student learning experience rather than just the inputs through teaching quality assurance. The University also developed its first learning and teaching strategy to focus on enhancement of the student experience.

The University was now better placed to enhance learning and teaching but this was still not being done in a sufficiently co-ordinated way to make significant impact. The work of QMEU remained discrete from the work of those engaged in staff development and the development of learning technologies. The Learning and Teaching Strategy of the University also remained separate from the Corporate Plan and there was no shared sense of direction between those responsible for learning and teaching and those responsible for research and knowledge transfer.

By 2006 the local context had changed significantly. Most significantly the University had developed a much clearer strategic focus, following a year-long consultation process involving staff, students and stakeholders. The Balanced Scorecard strategy execution tool (Kaplan and Norton, 1996) was used to help focus the work on

developing strategic aims, improving communications and ultimately monitoring performance. The planning was underpinned by shared values agreed by all members of the University community.



Diagram 1. Values of the University of Leeds  
(<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/about/strategy/values.htm>)

The way the University was to approach all it does was to be shaped by these values of academic excellence, community, professionalism and inclusiveness.

The result of the year-long consultation process was a new strategy represented by a one page map.

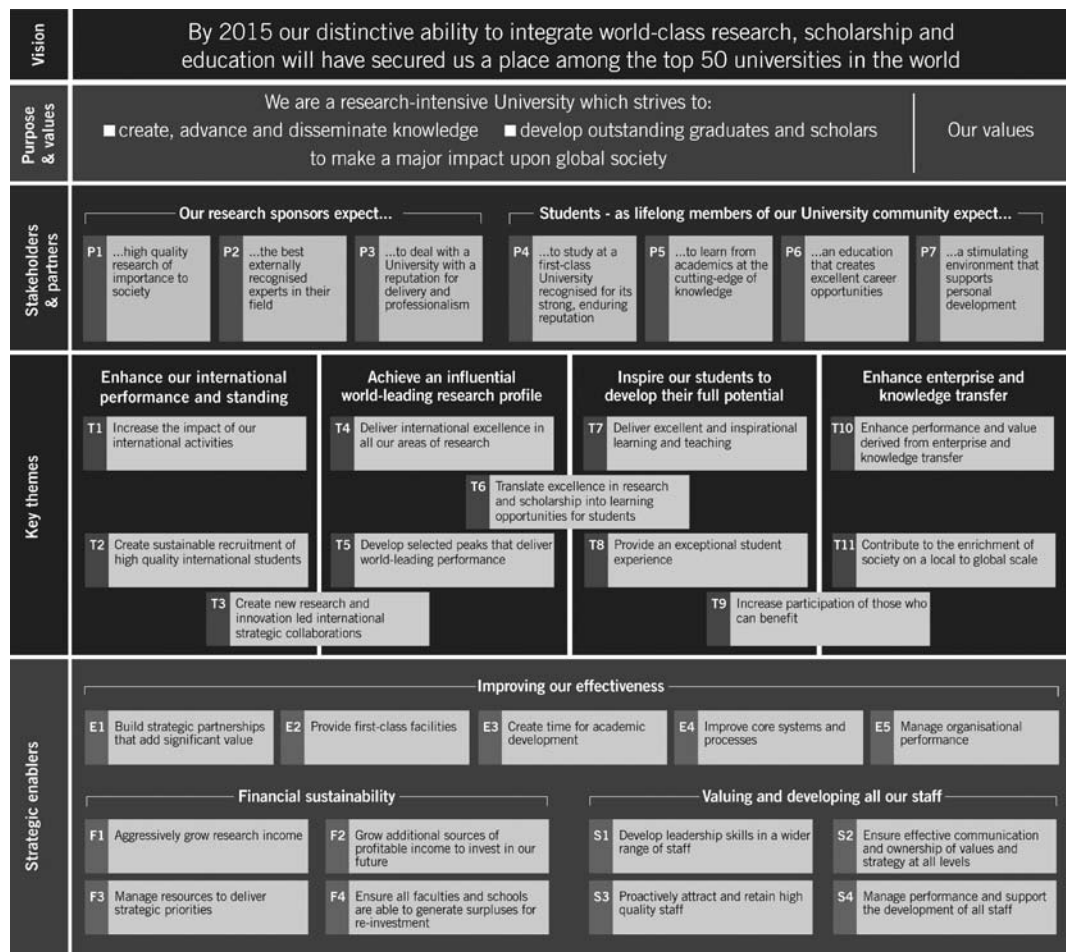


Diagram 2. The University of Leeds Strategy Map  
([http://www.leeds.ac.uk/about/strategy/strategy\\_map.htm#mainmap](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/about/strategy/strategy_map.htm#mainmap))

The Strategy Map informs all activities and the setting of priorities. Integral to the map is the close integration of learning and teaching with research and the provision of an exceptional student experience.

Detailed plans for the implementation of each key theme support the Strategy Map. Development of the plan to achieve the theme 'inspire our students to develop their full potential' indicated the need to consider the University's central structures as supporting learning and teaching. A shift from accountability towards the management of learning and teaching with enhancement in mind was necessary to achieve an exceptional student experience. Accordingly, during 2006/07 a detailed review was undertaken by a group of academic staff of the central support for learning and teaching within the University. As a result of the review, the potential for achievement of the University vision was strengthened by the setting up of a new Learning and Teaching Support Group (LTS) which, whilst retaining the important institutional role in respect of quality assurance, was given explicit and deliberate responsibility at the level of the institution for the enhancement of learning and teaching.

The new support group brought together under one director the several units supporting learning and teaching. These are a restructured unit responsible for quality assurance – the Academic Quality and Standards Team (AQST), the Staff and Departmental Development Unit (SDDU), the Academic Skills Group, the VLE Team and the Learning and Teaching Support Office. The intention was to provide greater strategic direction and co-ordination for these units in supporting the implementation of the University's new strategy. LTS reports directly to the senior management of the University through the Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching.

The co-ordinated Learning and Teaching Support (LTS) is able to ensure that quality assurance is more effectively linked to quality enhancement in a cycle of continuous improvement, such as by developing annual health checks of schools. LTS is also well placed to further the move to a more student-centred approach to learning and teaching through its work with the Students' Union. An example of this is the key role of LTS in the development of the University Partnership Agreement which sets out clearly the responsibilities of the University, the Schools and the students in ensuring the quality of learning and teaching.

Although administrative staff, members of LTS have a wealth of expertise in learning and teaching and has been able to develop credibility with academic staff. The LTS can also link directly with externally funded learning and teaching groups within the University such as the University's three Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and HEA Subject Centres. An effectiveness review of LTS has recently been completed which indicates that after two years of operation the group is seen as 'helping to ensure that quality enhancement is hand-in-glove with quality assurance, with the former being seen as a major purpose and outcome of the latter'.

### **Conclusions**

Previously, enhancement of learning and teaching at the University of Leeds took place as a consequence of the work of individual members of academic and support staff largely unsupported in any co-ordinated way by the University and certainly with little shared vision or direction.

Whilst the structural changes at the University of Leeds have been demonstrably successful they cannot be seen in isolation from the context of the development of a clearer vision and strategy across the institution. It is argued here that the structural changes alone could not necessarily have led to effective enhancement. A recent QAA Institutional Audit in fact noted as a feature of good practice 'the development, consistent use and presentation of the Strategy Map as a tool for enhancement'.

A recent internal analysis suggests that the following factors have been the key to the significant success of enhancement at the University of Leeds:

- having a clear and shared vision of where the University is going and how this will be achieved, i.e. the Strategy Map
- the restructuring of central teams into a more co-ordinated group overseen by a senior manager within the University.



It is therefore argued that, while you can have central structures and rules and regulations to ensure quality assurance, for enhancement you need, in addition, a clear sense of direction. In a recent review of the University of Leeds it has been stated by Kaplan and Norton (2008) that the University has an appropriate stretch goal, definition of niche and time horizon in its vision. These are regarded as the crucial elements of any vision statement if it is to be effective in encouraging change.

The sense of direction and the associated leadership of this vision promotes:

- the building of trust across the institution such that quality assurance can effectively lead to enhancement and not be seen as bureaucracy
  - the development of a culture of time and opportunity which gives staff the time, scope and confidence to try new things defined by themselves and not by external drivers
  - the seeking of ways to empower academics by giving back to them the responsibility for the quality of their teaching
  - the development of a community where learning and teaching are as exciting and rewarding as research.
- and these are the vital elements for enhancement to take place.

## Thematic quality review as a supplement to departmental quality reviews: a case study within the Irish university system

Heinz Lechleiter<sup>1</sup>

### Background and context

The focus of quality assurance in Higher Education can either be on accreditation processes and is then strongly tied in with academic programmes, or it can encompass support and administration as well as academic issues and in this case concentrates on departments. In this paper I am going to report on a third approach that focuses on quality assurance along the line of a theme which arises from other reviews and allows a close look at areas within a university where responsibilities overlap.

The Irish quality assurance regime follows the departmental approach. The main advantages of such an approach are summarised in Reichert (2008, p. 7). They relate

...to the opportunity to connect curricular, institutional and research structures and activities around a common ground of the larger subject area which usually encompasses a wide number of fields, programmes and even disciplines (...) Benefits also consist in the attention paid to real strategic decisions like hiring policy, restructuring, new interdisciplinary initiatives.

According to the *Universities Act*, Section 35 (2), the Irish universities are legally obligated to conduct evaluations "of each department and, where appropriate, faculty of the university and any service provided by the university". Following from this statutory obligation the Irish universities' quality assurance system is organised in the form of cyclical departmental quality reviews covering both academic entities like schools, faculties<sup>2</sup> and research centres, as well as administrative and support units ranging from the Computer Services Department to the Finance Office, from Human Resources to the President's Office.

The system of departmental reviews has been in place for about 10 years and has, in general terms, been quite successful as the report from the EUA-led review of quality assurance in Irish universities in 2005 (EUA Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities – Sectoral Report<sup>3</sup>, p. 14, Section 43) shows. In it is stated that the Irish universities' quality assurance system

... would appear to strike the right tone and combination of public interest, accountability, and university autonomy. It encourages a greater focus on quality and improvement than some systems worldwide, while at the same time being less intrusive than some other systems in Europe.

In the same report the reviewers find that "due to the structures of the universities and the department-based approach of the QA process, a number of strategic issues were not covered by regular review procedures, unless [they were] the responsibility of a specific service department. (...) It may be useful for the university to evaluate such cross-cutting issues from time to time as part of its own strategic development." (Sectoral Report, p. 21, sec. 86). Consequently, the EUA report makes the recommendation that "Universities should also consider reviewing university-wide issues, not linked to any one unit, but essential for the ongoing strategic development of the institution" (Sectoral Report, p. 27, sec. 132).

Most of the Irish universities have completed their first cycle of reviews and have embarked on the second cycle. The transition from the first to the second and following cycles of reviews has offered the opportunity to reassess and reappraise quality reviews both on a nation-wide basis and at the level of the individual institution. Nationally,

<sup>1</sup> Director of Quality Promotion, Dublin City University. I would like to acknowledge the huge contribution made by all of those involved in the review, specifically my colleagues and review champions Dr Claire Bohan and Dr Sarah Ingle, as well as my quality colleague Adrian Thomas from the University of Limerick.

<sup>2</sup> Various also named *departments* and *colleges* in some of the universities. The nomenclature chosen here reflects the use of language in Dublin City University.

<sup>3</sup> This report will be referred to as *Sectoral Report* henceforth.

the fact that the quality system is maturing was acknowledged by the preparation and publication of a revised edition of the *Framework for Quality in Irish Universities* jointly published by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) in October 2007, a document that takes into consideration global and European developments in Third (and Fourth) Level Education. The *Framework* also incorporates recommendations made as a result of the above mentioned EUA review of the Irish Universities' quality assurance systems.

In Dublin City University (DCU), like in most of the other Irish universities, all departments have undergone a review. DCU is now in the process of making the transition from the first to the second cycle of reviews. This transition is accompanied by a shift of focus from establishing the mechanisms necessary to conduct peer reviews successfully to setting up mechanisms that concentrate on the successful implementation of changes recommended in the reviews. The transition can be described in terms of three interrelated phases.

The first phase followed the Institutional Quality Review of Dublin City University. In their report the EUA reviewers saw an overarching university-wide analysis of the results of the internal quality review process as "important for the work of the Quality Promotion Committee, the Academic Council and the Governing Authority." (EUA Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities – University Report<sup>4</sup>, HEA/IUQB, 2005, p. 23).

Following from this, DCU set about gaining an overview of themes which reoccurred in the various departmental reviews. They were researched and recorded in so called *Common Themes Reports*, which were drawn together from all existing Peer Group Reports, separately for academic schools (in 2005), for administrative and support units (in 2006) and for research centres (in 2008). These reports were presented to, and discussed by, all the decision making groupings in the university; they are available to the entire DCU community on the intranet. The research conducted for the Common Themes Reports confirmed, not very surprisingly, that academic Schools across the campus encountered similar problems. Top of the list are the three key areas of *funding* and *resources*, *internal* and *external communication* and *organisational structures*.

While the recurrence of these three themes throughout the university was to be expected, the Common Themes brought to light a number of issues that would otherwise not as readily have been noticeable. Among such issues are, for example, the wide variety of ways of dealing with, and the range of different solutions for, similar challenges. For example, the personal tutor system which was introduced on a university-wide scale is handled quite differently from School to School. Another example concerns the importance of the definition and recognition of all aspects of the academic workload. When the flow of funding was steered towards research, activities in this area (e.g. research output to fit the metrics in use, time spent on funding applications, and promoting research cooperation) were seen to be valued, while on the teaching and learning side actions to rationalise and create more flexibility in terms of delivery and autonomy of learning came into the limelight with knock-on effects on the definition of academic work. A further finding was characterised by a palpable void: this is the absence of attention on the part of the peer reviewers in respect to what is variously called *community relations* or *civic engagement* or equivalents which form part of the self-assessment template for academic units (beside *teaching and learning*, *research and scholarship* and *organisation and management*). This absence finds its counterpart in an apparent confusion around civic engagement by the Schools who subsumed issues as different as marketing, student recruitment and student access under this section of their Self-Assessment Reports. One further issue that stood out in the Common Themes was *student experience* with all its facets and including undergraduate, postgraduate and non-traditional student experience. The latter, by the way, is also explicitly mentioned as a possible candidate for thematic reviews in the Sectoral Report (p. 21, Sec. 85).

However, despite the above mentioned examples which highlighted the potential for thematic reviews, the feeling was that it was exactly what the departmental reviews, on their own or in combination, did *not* see and therefore did *not* mention in the reports which constituted the rationale for thematic reviews. For example, the recommendation to "develop collaboration with support services" was only made in one singular case which, in the light of the outcomes of the Thematic Review, indicates that unit-based reviews do not have the capacity to reveal an all-encompassing view.

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<sup>4</sup> This report will be referred to as *Institutional Report* henceforth.

The second phase consisted of the initiation of an annual *Student Forum on Quality* (Student ForQ) in which students from across the campus are given the opportunity to discuss and evaluate their experience in a facilitated workshop format. Each Student Forum on Quality results in a report which, like the Common Themes Reports, is seen and discussed by all central decision makers within the university. Like the Common Themes Reports the report on the Student ForQs is available to the entire university community on the intranet.

The 2007 Forum explored who or what students interact with in the university, and which of these interactions are of the greatest importance to them. The three first points that came up were, in this order, the Registry (the office responsible for student admission, enrolment and records), other students, and lecturers, while, for example the department that looks after students in DCU, *Student Support & Development*, was more or less hidden in the mid-field of agents or agencies students see themselves as dealing with. This does not mean, of course, that *Student Support & Development* is inactive; rather it means that its activities are either not attributed to the department or are taken for granted. One of the overall results of the 2007 Student Forum on Quality was the following:

Students' contact with non-academic units, staff and companies heavily influences the student experience (e.g. registration, security, accommodation, bar, restaurants, bank, clubs and societies).

This confirms the impression that both academic and non-academic units form an integral part of the student experience, in some cases agencies which are not even part of the university in any legal sense.

#### ***The introduction of thematic reviews***

The combination of results obtained from the EUA review of quality assurance in Irish universities, and of the Common Themes reports, as well as the Student ForQs led to the decision to introduce, in a third phase, *Thematic Quality Reviews* in DCU to complement the established departmental reviews. A thematic approach in itself is not a radical departure, but so far it has been applied mainly in inter-institutional, often nation-wide surveys – as opposed to reviews, both in Ireland and the UK<sup>5</sup>, and in “a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience”, facilitated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland (QAA) (Gordon, 2008, Preface).

In the case of the DCU review it was decided to retain the basic principles and procedures used in department-based reviews and to follow the same succession of steps, which are:

- a detailed self-assessment process with a Self-assessment Report (SAR)
- a peer group visit with a mixture of internal and (a majority of) external reviewers resulting in a Peer Group Report (PGR) with a number of recommendations for action
- a follow-on process initiated by the completion of a Quality Improvement Plan (QuIP).

Both the PGR and the QuIP are published on the Quality Promotion Unit website after authorisation by Governing Authority.

The first Thematic Review was to be conducted on First year and Beginner<sup>6</sup> Student Experience for a variety of reasons including the rapidly changing sectoral, national and international context. Within this context “issues of retention ... have resulted in DCU and the university sector generally, becoming increasingly aware of and concerned with the nature and quality of first year and beginner student experience.” (PGR, p.2)

The PGR recognises that the “scale of activity encompassed with the First Year and Beginner Student Experience is very substantial, including as it does every point of interaction that first time students have with the university in advance of and during their first year period of registration” but that the experience of students amounts to more than the sum of the various points of contact and procedures encountered as it depends on the way in which these “are combined or integrated at DCU, and their efficacy and adaptability” (p.2).

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Park (2008). In Ireland a nation-wide review of the organisation of PhD programmes is planned for 2008-09.

<sup>6</sup> “Beginners” were included to cover students who transfer from other institutions and international students who are beginners in terms of starting out in DCU but who are typically not in their first year of study.

## **Meeting the Challenges: Observations and Outcomes**

The main challenges in conducting a thematic review are the complexity of the undertaking, the fact that there were no precedents for such a review, that the leadership for a thematic review is not as clear cut as for departmental reviews, that university-wide representation had to be in place, that follow-on processes are not as pre-defined, and that the timing of thematic reviews is not as pre-determined as in traditional reviews.

### ***Complexity***

The complexity of the task was immense. Therefore, a concise definition of the task at hand was of the essence. The peer review group, mirroring the definition in the SAR came up with the following definition:

The theme, First Year and Beginner Student Experience, encompasses the totality of first time undergraduate student experience at DCU. It includes every facet of university life – academic and non-academic, intellectual and social, individual and collective – as experienced by undergraduate students during their first period of registration with the university.

It will be appreciated that the definition is clear, concise and inclusive. This inclusiveness, however, serves to emphasise even more the complexity of the theme, and therefore the review process.

It was one aim of the review to gain involvement of as many as possible while keeping both the self-assessment and the peer group assessment as short and neat as possible. The leaders of the review were very efficient in putting together a team from across the university which covered all important aspects of the 1<sup>st</sup> year and beginner students experience, and in developing a methodology for capturing the issues at stake that gave all involved an opportunity to make their views known without taking too much of their time, as the results of a survey of those involved in the review shows.

### ***Development of Template***

Departmental self-assessments are based on pre-existing templates which have been adapted to the purposes of each individual university from the Irish Universities Association's and Quality Board's *Framework* document. For a thematic review no such template exists, since each thematic review is by definition different in character from other thematic reviews. Therefore, a suitable template needed to be prepared and discussed before the review commenced. In this case, a draft template was prepared by the Quality Promotion Unit, using existing parameters established in student centred discussions and student produced materials (Eurotop Student Conference) and research on the quality of education in Europe and worldwide as presented and discussed at conferences, for example the conference entitled "Quality of Education: In the Eye of the Beholder?" in Maastricht in November 2006. The draft template made use of previous experience in the area, such as the 2002 Universities UK report on Student Services. The suggested template was further discussed between the review champions and the Quality Promotion Unit and refined to include all aspects that were considered to be of importance for the review. In this context, it was thought that the combination of administrative and support efforts on the one hand and academic environment and support on the other hand was particularly important. The Self-Assessment Report, based on the template which evolved from the cooperation between the QPU and the champions eventually contained sections on Background and Context, Student Profile and Opinion, Physical Environment, Administrative Services, Student Support, Student Facilities, and Academic Environment, concluded by a Summary and Recommendations.

### ***Leadership***

Responsibility for leadership in the preparatory and self-assessment phase of departmental reviews lies with the head of the reviewed department. For thematic reviews, leadership is not as easily assigned nor even named. In the present case, the leaders for the self-assessment and the peer review process were termed 'champions' for want of a better word. At the outset, leadership was provided by the Director of Student Support & Development in DCU. It became obvious early in the preparatory stages of the review that the administrative and support side of the house would have to be balanced by the academic side. The role of the co-chair of the coordination committee for the review was taken by a lecturer in the DCU Business School. Both champions are also members of the university's Quality Promotion Committee.

The Coordination Committee consisted of 32 persons, representing administrative, welfare and support units (63%), academic staff from all faculties (31%) and the President and Deputy-President of the Students' Union in the university (6%).

#### ***Follow-on***

The leadership issue also arises in relation to the follow-on processes of the review. An overarching theme, by necessity, results in overarching recommendations by the peer review group. In order to avoid confusion about assigning responsibilities for the enactment of the recommendations, the peer group was encouraged to assign action items to specific departments and staff within the university as in the following example which was addressed to the Administration, the Estates Office and the Catering division:

Identify additional area(s) where students can consume their own food and drink and consider provision of access (supervised, if required) to microwave facilities and hot water.

This still leaves the task of assigning responsibilities within the three addressees of the recommendation and the coordination of the ensuing activities.

#### ***Timing***

The review came at a good time, therefore motivation was high. Issues relating to student retention, student life issues (such as the fact that many students hold down part time jobs throughout the semester), and the matter of college choice by students were widely discussed throughout the university in the run-up to and during the review. The Self-Assessment Report<sup>7</sup> states (p. 38):

The process of producing this report involved almost all Units, Departments, Offices, Schools and Faculties across the University. This made it a complex and challenging task, but the end result has provided a rewarding and extremely timely outcome.

As a general rule it can be said that the institutional review processes can supplement the cycle of departmental reviews, which tends to be planned far in advance, by the flexibility of thematic reviews which can be initiated at relatively short notice. However, care needs to be taken that the thematic review is not imposed but offered with a view to encouraging the discussion and implementation of changes in areas in which change is perceived to be necessary and beneficial.

#### **Results of Review**

Participation was very wide spread and active by all departments dealing with beginner students<sup>8</sup>, which is probably a sign that the timing of the review was right. One of the main differences between a departmental and a thematic review is that all of those involved in the review are involved as active contributors to the processes under review rather than as stakeholders or mere observers. As such, their involvement is more direct, immediate and concentrated on the issue at stake. From this point of view, the quality review – by bringing together representatives of all those who ultimately make up the first year and beginner student experience – is in itself part of the quality improvement process in the university.

A survey of the members of the coordination committee which was conducted after the completion of the peer review process shows encouraging results. The large majority of participants think the time and energy they gave to the review was well spent.

The review took place in April 2008, the Peer Group Report was finished in June and the Quality Improvement Plan in October of the same year. One of the review findings states:

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<sup>7</sup> There is agreement within the Irish universities' quality assurance system that self-assessment reports, as opposed to peer group reports and quality improvement plans shall not be published; therefore this SAR cannot be accessed on the DCU website.

<sup>8</sup> The only exceptions to this are, ironically, the students themselves. While the Student Union was actively involved in the process throughout, 'ordinary' students were difficult to win over for participation in focus groups and interviews with the peer review group.

It is clear that the process of this review has allowed the university to better articulate what is already being done to support the first year experience and that this has already generated a level of momentum that staff are keen to capitalise on.

The Peer Group acknowledges “the huge amount of activity that is going into supporting first year students and helping them progress on their programmes”. But there is room for improvement, as the Self-Assessment process had shown. The PGR makes about 30 recommendations. In many cases these are based on findings in the SAR which were validated by the Peer Group. One of the principal findings is the following:

There is a clear need for greater co-ordination and clarity in relation to first year and beginner student support. (...) A fully integrated approach to academic and non-academic support provision requires the endorsement and pro-active engagement of senior management within the university ...

Many of the recommendations in the PGR serve to detail necessary actions in order to reach such a “fully integrated approach”, examples of which are recommendations such as the following two:

Articulate a clear ladder of referral to ensure that students can access relevant support services (academic and non-academic) and/or can be appropriately referred by members of staff whom they approach for assistance. (Recommendation 4)

Clarify the role of the personal tutor or academic advisor, adopting a universal definition of the role, applying a selection process to identify suitable staff for this purpose, providing appropriate training to those staff and providing recognition for the role within workload distribution and promotions criteria, and appoint a university officer to oversee the operation of the personal tutor/academic advisor system when revised. (Recommendation 27)

Even though, at the time of writing, it is early days after the review it can safely be said that the university is benefiting and will continue to benefit from the thematic review.

### Conclusion

A lot of changes are underway, some of them completed. The most important of these is probably the establishment of a cross-university Student Experience Committee which had its origin in the coordination committee for the Thematic Review and which is chaired by the Vice-President for Learning Innovation. From this point of view it can be stated that the effort in preparing and conducting a thematic quality review as shown above has produced enough of a return to make the exercise worth the while. A similar quality review on all aspects of the postgraduate student experience in Dublin City University has been set in motion; further thematic reviews, for example on assessment and examination procedures, and on community relations and civic engagement are being planned, in discussion with all relevant parts of the university. The importance of transparency and consultation in the run-up to thematic quality reviews cannot be underrated, as the full value of such reviews can only be realised when all participants feel that scope of the review is as required and the timing is right.

Table 1 below summarises some of the main differences between departmental and thematic reviews as they have been touched upon in the preceding case study. Each of the points would merit a fuller exploration, but for the moment they may serve to highlight in which way the two types of review can complement each other.

	departmental	thematic
Timeframe	cyclical	flexible
Focus	disciplinary	interdisciplinary
Leadership	predetermined	elective
Improvement	result orientated	process orientated
Approach	top-down	bottom-up
Time Orientation	past/future related	present related
Roles	participants and stakeholders	participants
Template	existing	tailor-made
Follow-on process	predetermined	negotiated

Table 1. Departmental and Thematic Reviews

## **Future directions for the Scottish enhancement-led approach to quality**

*Alan Davidson*<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

This paper considers the case of the national approach to quality in higher education (HE) in Scotland, termed the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), at a time of transition from the first to the second cycle of implementation.

The approach and QEF model were presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> European Quality Assurance Forum in Munich in 2006 (Davidson, 2006). This 2008 paper focuses on:

- evaluation and review of the first cycle, describing the approaches to review and the broad finding
- future directions and changes proposed for the second cycle and
- key issues of work-in-progress, and for discussion.

The author has been involved in all stages including:

- development and implementation of internal, institutional policies and processes
- development of national policies and initiatives and
- as a reviewer in external quality reviews of institutions.

### **The national context - Scotland in the UK and Europe**

Higher education is one of the areas of responsibility that is devolved from the UK government to the Scottish Government. This encourages an approach to quality in higher education that is distinctive from approaches in other parts of the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), but which shares a number of common reference points for quality and standards in higher education.

The primary areas of difference in policy are associated with:

- national funding councils and their policies
- approaches to quality assurance and enhancement
- approaches to public information on quality and
- national qualification and credit frameworks (however there are agreed points of alignment between the different national frameworks).

Common areas include:

- the academic infrastructure (QAA, 2009), providing external reference points for quality and standards
- use of external examiners and
- the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) method used to evaluate research outputs within higher education institutions.

The key players at national level can be considered under four broad headings:

- 20 higher education institutions, including 14 universities. They are autonomous organisations and collectively encompass a wide range in terms of size and mission. Universities-Scotland is the collective organisation that represents, promotes and supports the sector
- the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC) is the body that distributes Scottish Government funding for teaching and learning, research and other activities in the higher (university) and further (college) sectors

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<sup>1</sup> Dean, Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching & Assessment, The Robert Gordon University.



- Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) is the national agency responsible for developing and operating external quality assurance and enhancement arrangements reflect the distinctive needs of higher education in Scotland and
- a number of student organisations that have representative and support roles: the National Union of Students Scotland (NUS Scotland), the Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland (CHESS), and Students Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs).

The Higher Education Quality Working Group (HEQWG) is a collective group that comprises representatives from the key players plus the Higher Education Academy and a representative from the further education (college sector).

The sector is compact in terms of size and geography and has a distinctive sense of identity. These factors, plus reflection on experience to-date, support a partnership approach to quality across the sector.

### **The national approach to quality in Scottish HE – the Quality Enhancement Framework**

The Quality Enhancement Framework consists of five inter-related elements, summarised in Table 1, see also (QAA Scotland, 2003).

A comprehensive programme of subject reviews, to be run by institutions themselves
Enhancement-led Institution-level Review, [ELIR] which will involve all Scottish HE institutions over a four-year cycle
Improved forms of public information about quality, based on addressing the different needs of a range of stakeholders including students and employers
A greater voice for student representatives in institutional quality systems, supported by a new national development service
A national programme of quality enhancement themes, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in higher education

*Table 1. The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework*

### ***Evaluation and review of the first cycle of the QEF***

Evaluation, review and ongoing development were embedded throughout implementation of the first cycle. The principal elements and timescale are summarised in Figure 1, and are described briefly below. Details of the approaches to evaluation are included in the cited references.

#### **Elements of review of the first cycle**

##### ***Longitudinal, external, independent review***

An independent, external evaluation of the QEF approach was commissioned by the Funding Council from the outset. This started with a baseline evaluation, informing the first annual report, then two further annual evaluations with interim reports, and a final report published in 2007 (Scottish Funding Council, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b).

##### ***Independent Observer's report on ELIR***

The first year of implementation of the new Enhancement-Led Institutional Review process included independent observation, monitoring and reporting (QAA, 2004).

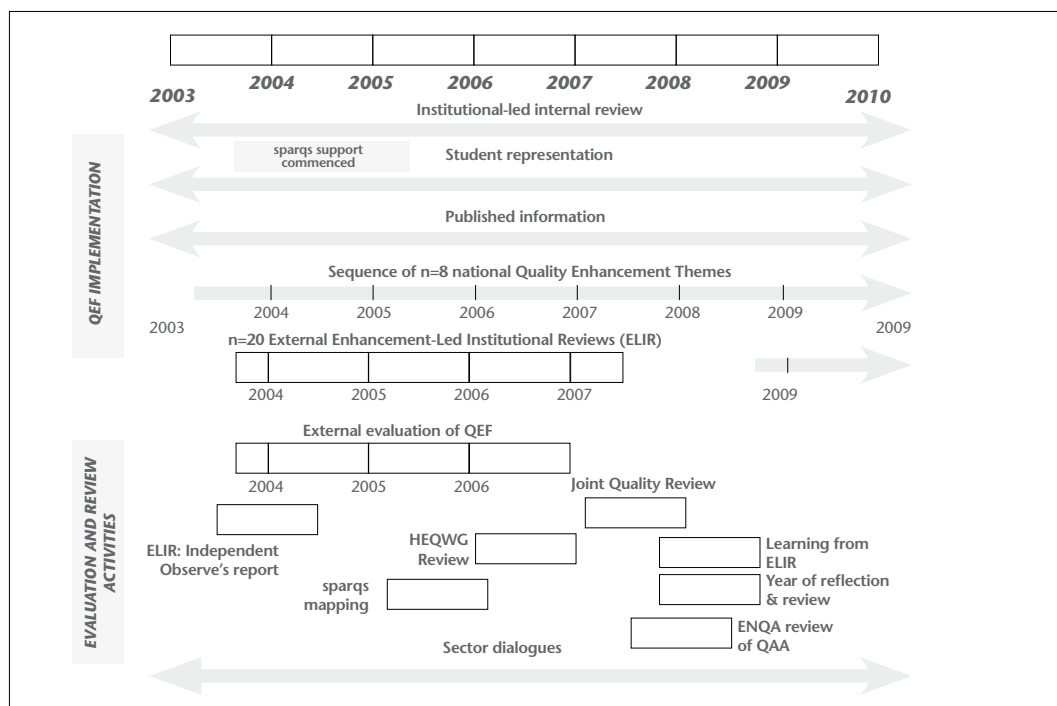


Figure 1. QEF Implementation, evaluation and review

### Ongoing evaluation and dialogues

A range of evaluations, reviews and dialogues took place throughout the first cycle. Individual activities, initiatives and events were evaluated, e.g. each external (ELIR) review was evaluated with an annual overview; each enhancement theme was evaluated. Outcomes from these activities were routinely discussed at sector committees and representative groups, which took an overview of emerging messages and issues.

### sparqs mapping project

Student involvement in quality processes within institutions was evaluated by *sparqs*, through a sector wide mapping project (*sparqs*, 2006).

### HEQWG 2006 review

Towards the end of the first cycle of external (ELIR) reviews, partners from the HEQWG undertook an evaluation of the effectiveness of its method of implementation (Scottish Funding Council, 2006b).

### Joint Quality Review Group (JQRG)

During the first cycle, there were changes in the organisation responsible for distributing government funding to Scottish universities. Previously, there were separate funding councils for higher education (universities) and further education (colleges). The two formerly separate councils were merged to create the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC), with a new chairperson and new board. An early action of the new council was to initiate a review of approaches to quality in both sectors, led by the Joint Quality Review Group (JQRG), see (SFC, 2007c).

### Learning from ELIR

Following completion of the first cycle of external (ELIR) reviews, QAAS undertook an analysis of the full set of 20 review reports, to summarise key points and messages on key themes. These are reported in a series of *Learning from ELIR* reports (QAA, 2008a).

### Year-of-reflection and sector development activities

A 'year-of-reflection' was scheduled at the end of the first cycle of external (ELIR) reviews. This included a set of projects with both evaluation and development objectives intended to address issues and opportunities identified from evaluation of the first cycle, in particular the outcomes from the JQRG. These covered:

- good practice in institution-led reviews
- good practice in preparing self-evaluation documents for external review (ELIR)
- indicators for enhancement (Enhancement Themes, 2008a)
- cultures, systems and structures of enhancement (Enhancement Themes, 2008b) and
- impacts of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Themes (Enhancement Themes, 2008c).

#### ***ENQA Review of QAA***

The Scottish approach was included within an external review to assess the level of its compliance against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, in order to re-confirm membership of the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) for a further five years. The review visit took place in April 2008 and the report noted:

QAA's overall performance against the standards of the ESG is very high. Where the Panel has made detailed comments on particular aspects of its work, these are designed to deliver further incremental improvement to an already strong organisation. QAA is fit for purpose, well led and well managed at both Board and Executive levels. The Panel has been consistently impressed by the calibre and professionalism of all those contributing to the work of QAA in maintaining quality and standards across HE in the UK. (ENQA, 2008, p.27)

As an example, the Panel has reviewed in detail the recent development of a revised process for Enhancement led Institutional Review (ELIR) in Scotland and believes this to be an outstanding exemplar of a dynamic process which has fully engaged with stakeholders, but which at the same time has preserved the integrity and independence of the process. (ENQA, 2008, p. 9)

#### ***Learning from evaluation and review of the first cycle***

In this section, the broad findings from the collective set of evaluation and review activities are summarised. In general, they are not attributed to specific elements of the QEF, or elements of evaluation or review. Rather, they are summarised under general themes and pointers for future development. The following section '*What will be done differently ...*' considers each of the specific elements of the QEF.

#### **Broad findings**

##### ***Headline message***

The headline message is very positive:

- The approach has been able to consider both quality assurance and quality enhancement
- In general, there has been a good connection between external and internal quality processes
- The QEF is fit for purpose, fit for context, and fit for the future, which is summarised in the introduction to the final report of independent evaluation:

The approach to quality that we review here is ambitious, distinctive and, so far, successful (Scottish Funding Council, 2007b, p. 5).

##### ***Evolution, not revolution***

Following from this, the next cycle should be 'evolution, not revolution', keeping the same basic model, but addressing limitations and opportunities identified in the various evaluations. There was a strong sense of ownership of the QEF by universities, which was demonstrated throughout discussions within the JQRG.

##### ***Key principles***

The JQRG report highlighted three principles that should guide the second cycle in both higher education and further education sectors:

the key principles of high quality learning, student engagement, and quality culture, as underpinning expectations in all aspects of our quality systems (Scottish Funding Council, 2007c, p.2).

## **Aspects for development**

### ***Clarity of reporting***

Evaluation of the external review (ELIR) method highlighted a need to re-consider optimum forms of reporting from quality processes, and the usefulness of information to the full range of stakeholders.

### ***Equity and diversity***

The JQRG report noted changes in national legislation and general concerns within society to increase explicit consideration of equity and diversity for all students, irrespective of gender, age, disability etc.

### ***International focus***

The JQRG report noted the increasing extent and significance of internalisation for the Scottish HE sector and urged an increasing international focus, with several dimensions:

- a concern to learn from, and contribute to, international leading-edge practice in learning and teaching
- increased explicit consideration of the quality of experience of international students who are studying in Scotland, or studying for Scottish degrees through collaborative arrangements
- increased consideration of international aspects within curricula and
- addition of a non-UK reviewer to ELIR review teams.

### ***Potential for 'initiative fatigue'***

Whilst there was a strong recognition of the value of national enhancement activities, there was a concern to avoid initiative- and theme- overload on universities. Within, and across the themes, there was a trend towards convergence and coherence of issues and action points e.g. consideration of graduate attributes and learning outcomes was a common focus across several topic themes.

### ***Indicators of enhancement***

The JQRG report noted an interest in indicators of, or perhaps for, enhancement and evaluation of impact.

### ***What will be done differently in the second cycle***

The broad message is '*evolution not revolution*', and there is no change to the basic structure or general approach of the QEF. However each of the elements is being developed to reflect issues and opportunities identified through the evaluation and review activities.

### ***External reviews (ELIR)***

Revisions to the method include more explicit focus on:

- student engagement, in their studies, and in quality assurance and enhancement processes
- equality of opportunity for all students, reflecting concerns about equity and diversity and
- international students, whether studying in Scotland, or aboard for Scottish degree awards through collaborative arrangements.

The structure and guidelines for reporting are revised, to meet the needs of specific audiences better. All review teams will include an international member, i.e. from outside the UK, who will be a full member of the team. Support for effective implementation will include sharing effective practice on preparation of self-evaluation documents. See (QAA, 2008b)

### ***Institution-led reviews***

Changes in guidance for institution led reviews include increased, explicit focus on:

- equality of opportunity for all students
- international students, and collaborative provision and
- the role of support services in quality.

### ***Scottish Quality Enhancement Themes***

The next phase will consist of two themes of work plus a programme of international benchmarking activities. An integrative theme will provide support for universities to consolidate and work with the outcomes from the topic themes to-date, reflecting local contexts and priorities. This will run in parallel with an institutional theme, on the management of enhancement within universities. All the topic themes in the first cycle included a strong international focus, through literature / web reviews, and participation in the activities by international experts. These will continue, and the international dimension will be strengthened by a programme of international benchmarking activities. These will seek to learn from effective international practice in specific topics. The first topic is student support services, and this will be followed by a project considering effective practice in promoting a high quality experience for research degree students.

### ***Support for student engagement in quality processes***

The work of *sparqs* will be continuing, shaped by findings from its mapping exercise and recently revised strategy. Additionally, the National Union of Students (Scotland) is working on a project to support student engagement, including a new sector wide representative group, the Student Learning Enhancement & Engagement Committee (SLEEC, 2008).

### ***Public information about quality***

Consideration of public information about quality is an area of for further work, recognising the complexity in terms of the wide range of types and forms of information, and of stakeholders and interests. A particular concern is information to inform student choice of university and degree programme.

## ***Conclusions***

This section summarises broad conclusions, with an indication of their impact and significance for universities, and a brief analysis with reference to objectives for the theme of the Third European Quality Assurance Forum. The final section considers ways forward, with broad messages for working within universities, drawing on recent literature on quality cultures.

### **Broad conclusions**

#### ***Re-emphasising the concept of quality***

One of the headline conclusions from the JQRG review was a re-emphasis of the view that the primary focus of quality processes should be on effectiveness of student learning:

the following aspects of institutional quality cultures have been particularly emphasised as contributing to effective student engagement and high-quality learning:

- the support of students as active participants, engaged in the creation of their knowledge and understanding, and taking responsibility for their own learning
- learners being engaged through effective guidance and support mechanisms in making informed choices in relation to their learning, curricula and future career and personal development paths
- learners being engaged in decision-making processes relating to the curricula, and learning and support strategies and provision
- learners being engaged in the provision of feedback, perspectives and insights
- the professionalism of staff responsible for designing and supporting the student learning experience.

(QAA, 2008b, paras 15 & 17)

Three terms summarise the general direction of travel, and are shaping reflection and actions across the sector and within institutions: student engagement; quality cultures; and indicators of enhancement.

#### ***Student engagement***

The focus and emphasis on two dimensions of student engagement, in QA and QE processes, and in their learning, builds on the ideas within the first cycle of 'raising the student voice' and 'students as active participants'. It fits with the idea of 'quality as transformation', (Harvey, 2006 & 2008), and reflects developments in the USA and Australia. It effectively defines high quality teaching as teaching which engages students. It does, however, present challenges for staff, and perhaps also some students, who may have been accustomed to predominantly transmissive or passive approaches; also narrow conceptions of students-as-consumers.

A typical response within an institution is reflection on these dimensions, questioning 'where are we now', and 'what should we change'. A specific example from the author's own university is the radical revision and re-focussing of the internal subject (course) quality review process. A broad objective is to increase the focus on 'how' students learn, as opposed to 'what' they learn, and to promote reflection and change to enhance effectiveness of engagement and learning.

#### **Quality cultures**

One of the evaluation and development projects in the *Year of Reflection* focussed on cultures of quality enhancement and quality management systems and structures within institutions (Enhancement Themes, 2008b). The methodology included discussions with a wide range of participants and a review of relevant literature.

The findings recognised:

- a wide range of both sector-wide and institutional activities that have had a positive impact on the quality of education provision in the student experience and
- changes addressing inefficiencies or barriers.

However the findings noted:

- that progress tends to be located in pockets of good practice and
- the significant challenges of building a shared vision across the institution, and of communicating ideas and effective practice across subjects within the institution.

Findings included a tendency for external, 'official' quality processes, specifically the ELIR institutional review process and the Quality Enhancement Themes to be viewed as the primary sources of ideas about quality. One interpretation would be that this is indicative of a predominantly compliance approach. However findings also indicated that the external enhancement-led approach is encouraging many institutions to re-shape their internal review approaches to make them more enhancement-oriented.

Recommendations included development of tools and support resources to universities to help them reflect and nurture internal cultures of quality, drawing on models from the literature including those discussed by Harvey and Stensaker (2007), and Vettori et al (2007).

#### **Indicators of enhancement**

Another of the projects in the *Year of reflection* was tasked to consider indicators of enhancement. This project has raised some fundamental concerns within universities. First, might it focus on what is easy to measure, rather than what is important and significant in student engagement and learning? Second, might it be seen as a checklist for accountability compliance, and hence drive responses towards external impression management rather than genuine enhancement? The points of emphasis within the introduction have at least acknowledged these concerns:

to facilitate the use of the indicators as a catalyst for discussion at a variety of different levels: by individual practitioners; by the course or module team; by institutional, faculty or school committees; and at the level of the sector as a whole

they will certainly not be used by QAA or SFC as any kind of checklist or reporting framework.

(Enhancement Themes, 2008a, p. 1)

The Indicators are presented as 10 aspects, including:

*Alignment of activities.* Promoting a learner-centred and cohesive approach which is aligned with policy and practice and is informed by a systematic understanding of learner expectations, needs and aspirations.

*Student engagement in learning.* Being active in supporting students to become purposeful partners in their learning and providing them with appropriate opportunities for effective engagement.

*Student engagement in processes.* Ensuring that all policy, strategy and practice relating to the student learning experience is informed by a continuous engagement and dialogue - both formal and informal - with students.

*Quality cultures.* Enabling a reflective quality culture to be supported and developed through a framework of staff and student support structures, and by the promotion of approaches to learning and teaching which are aligned with a shared vision of student-centred learning.

(Enhancement Themes, 2008a, p. 3)

Discussions of these aspects have highlighted concerns from universities that they might imply a top-down, one-size fits all approach, asking questions e.g.:

*Alignment of activities.* Promoting a learner-centred and cohesive approach which is aligned with policy and practice and is informed by *systematic understanding* of learner expectations, needs and aspirations.  
*Question: whose understanding?*

*Quality cultures.* Enabling a reflective quality culture to be supported and developed through a framework of staff and student support structures, and by the promotion of approaches to learning and teaching which are aligned with a *shared vision* of student-centred learning. *Questions: whose vision, and is it shared?*

However examples of positive interpretations, and pointers for ways of working with the indicators, are illustrated by the following points from discussion by a group of academic staff at a sector workshop held as part of the development process:

The use of the indicators as a catalyst for discussion at a variety of levels. This was endorsed, with a consensus that this text should be emphasised very strongly.

'Quality Cultures' – the plural is welcomed, recognising there will be different visions and cultures within different contexts and climates, e.g. at the departmental, subject-based level.

Focus should recognise potential ambiguities, different interpretations and different answers at different levels. There will be different visions at different levels and subjects. Discussion and sharing of these differences within institutions could be creative and productive and should not necessarily be seen as negative or destructive.

Use within institutions should encourage:

- engagement by staff
- open and creative discussion, to make sense of, translate, contextualise and unpack – 'what we make of it, what we take from it.'

(Davidson, 2008)

## **Ways forward**

### ***Continuing linkages between external and internal factors and processes***

Two broad trends can be identified. First, a trend for internal processes to reflect external, with developments to accommodate new expectations and references e.g.: increased focus on international dimensions; equity and diversity; and the role of support services. Typically, institutions are reviewing their quality processes and making adjustments. Second, increased awareness of what is going on, and sharing practice across the sector, in part shaped by collective activities such as the Scottish Quality Enhancement Themes e.g.:

The majority of those asked about strengths of the themes strategy cited the fact that the QE themes acted as a means of focussing debate, raising awareness of specific topics across the whole of the Scottish HE sector and served to foster a 'collective consciousness' of key issues of common concern. The current themes in particular encourage and support the sharing of good practice between institutions. Related to this issue of focus, some informants referred to the emphasis on the student experience inherent in all the themes as a particularly welcome aspect of the themes. (Enhancement Themes, 2008c, p. 55)

### ***Working with the concept of quality cultures***

Some of the broad messages from the literature on quality cultures are helpful in thinking about ways of working with the potentially problematic concept and detail of indicators. The following key points from the literature are relevant, see (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) and (Vettori et al, 2007):

- a set of local sub-cultures exist within an institution, in groups such as subject departments, each with its context and history
- underpinning values and notions of quality, often implicit, are significant and may differ across groups and
- a quality culture cannot be imposed from above.

Following from these key points, approaches that are more likely to be useful and successful emphasise:

- acknowledgement and empowerment of local actor groups, building trust and confidence and
- the importance of organisational learning, sharing, but not imposing ideas across an institution.

These ideas point to a possible way forward for an institution working with the concepts of cultures and indicators within the Scottish model:

- work with local groups or units
- help them make sense of the concepts and messages
- encourage and support them in dialogues around the questions and indicators, in their context, and reflecting their values and often implicit cultures (the way we do things)
- use external policies and guidelines as reference points, for discussion of positioning, and pointers for action, *Where are we now? Where might we go?* rather than as reporting points and
- encourage dialogue around the big, hard questions: *What do we really know about our students' learning? What should we change to make it better?*

### **Conclusion**

Working with the QEF is a complex and challenging undertaking, and there is a clear recognition that this is a long-term project, with ongoing challenges and developmental needs. Discussion at the Third Quality Assurance Forum (EUA, 2008) confirmed widespread interest in the Scottish approach and its ongoing development.



## **Developing internal quality assurance mechanisms - towards an East African quality assurance framework**

*Mayunga H.H. Nkunya<sup>1</sup>, Stefan Bienefeld<sup>2</sup> and Christoph Hansert<sup>3</sup>*

### **Background and Rationale**

Africa has different systems of education that are variously based on national, colonial and other legacies, and this hampers the mutual recognition of the different forms of educational certification and awards offered in different African countries. This also limits the mobility of students and trained human resources across the African continent. The African Union (AU) is committed to addressing this challenge as part of the implementation of the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015) [1-3]. The Second Decade of Education for Africa envisages harmonising higher education programmes in Africa so as to foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonisation of procedures and policies in higher education, and attainment of comparability of qualifications. The envisaged key results areas include development and maintenance of a continental framework for higher education qualifications by establishing harmonised regional higher education processes, which are integrated into a common continental system. This approach augurs well with the initiative by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) in collaboration with the higher education regulatory agencies in three East African countries (the Commission for Higher Education – CHE in Kenya, the Tanzania Commission for Universities – TCU, and the National Council for Higher Education – NCHE in Uganda), to introduce an East African quality assurance system.

Furthermore, higher education in Africa – just like elsewhere in the world – has witnessed a rapid expansion in the last 10 years. This is due to an increased public investment, establishment of public higher education institutions and socio-economic reforms allowing public-private partnership in higher education investment, which has led to a proliferation of higher education providers through the establishment of private universities. While this expansion has led to an increased access, the quality of the education provided by the existing and newly established higher education institutions has continued to raise serious concern. Also of concern is the need to ensure that higher education in Africa measures up to acceptable international standards, embracing comparability and compatibility of curricula regionally as well as internationally, in a bid to promote cross border education within and beyond the African continent. Such a drive is also expected to address the need for labour mobility for Africa's graduates, within the continent and beyond.

The higher education regulatory agencies in three East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) are mandated to oversee the establishment and management of quality higher education institutions in the region through national quality assurance systems. The agencies, which are publicly financed, also advise their respective governments on higher education matters and carry out reviews and accreditation of new institutions as well as programmes. National guidelines and criteria have been developed in all three countries [4-6], including a number of quantitative indicators (space, rooms, facilities etc) as well as indicators covering the curriculum and the qualifications of the teaching staff.

In order to harmonise and streamline accreditation and quality assurance procedures in the three East African countries, the regulatory agencies signed a Protocol of Understanding in July 2006. The Protocol formalises inter-agency collaboration in all matters related to the promotion of the management of higher education quality in the region. This has enabled the regulatory agencies to work closely together in all matters relating to maintaining appropriate higher education quality in the region. Furthermore, the regulatory agencies work closely with

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universities within the framework of the IUCEA, which draws membership from both public and private but state-recognised HEI's in the East African countries as well as by the regulatory agencies. The three countries share a common history, having existed as a common socio-economic block for quite a long time and hence the region has continued to exist as a unique higher education area. The countries exist within a legal entity of the East African Community (EAC) that was first formed in 1967 and lasted up to 1977 when it broke up. The Community was re-established in 2000 and higher education is one of the identified services in the cooperation agreement. With the recent admission of Rwanda and Burundi as full members of the Community and of the IUCEA, the combined population in the EAC region is about 100 million people, and considering the current pace, the number of HEI's in East Africa is expected to increase exponentially in the near future.

The three higher education regulatory agencies in collaboration with the IUCEA and universities in the individual countries are committed to strengthening the East Africa higher education area through the promotion and facilitation of student mobility, credit accumulation and transfer, and the exchange and sharing of information, academic staff and researchers. Furthermore, the higher education regulatory agencies and universities in East Africa are committed to assuring higher education quality in the region, through the establishment of common quality benchmarks, indicators and outcomes. Within this context, the three East African member states also aspire to achieve a gross higher education enrolment ratio of 25-30% by the year 2025. Furthermore, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania identify expanded access to quality higher education as an important input in implementing various policy frameworks that address poverty reduction (the National Programme for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction – MKUKUTA in Tanzania, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan – PEAP in Uganda, and the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation in Kenya), socio-economic developmental targets (Vision 2030 in Kenya, and Vision 2025 in Uganda and Tanzania respectively), and attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

Apart from the external QA processes which have already gained a certain institutionalisation in the national systems, the HEIs carry out internal QA practices, though, so far, such practices are less structured and differ between the institutions and the countries, notwithstanding the fact that there is a common history in terms of the establishment of higher education in the region and that there are many commonalities between the educational systems.

In 2006, the IUCEA Governing Board decided to introduce a common quality assurance system for universities in East Africa in order to promote harmonisation and comparability of the quality of higher education in the region and also to protect the integrity of East Africa as a credible higher education area. Therefore, in 2007 the IUCEA, together with the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Rectors' Conference and the University of Oldenburg in Germany, initiated a project to align internal QA mechanisms in the East African HEIs by two action lines, namely the development of a handbook on quality assurance for the East African region which provides a common framework for QA in the region and by conducting a pilot of the developed methodology with a group of selected institutions from the region. This project is supported financially by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). This article gives a summary of that process.

### **Methodology**

In order to promote stakeholder awareness and hence ensure acceptability of the proposed QA system, the IUCEA initially organised consultative discussions with senior government officials from the three East African countries, as well as vice chancellors, chief executive officers of the higher education regulatory agencies and some senior academics. The consultative process came up with the idea to develop a handbook containing QA instruments to be used in the region. The handbook entitled "**A road map to quality**" was developed by an external consultant from the Netherlands supported by a group of experts from East Africa and the IUCEA Standing Committee on Quality Assurance. The handbook comprises a number of volumes covering different aspects of QA from programme to institutional level and from the internal and external QA perspective.

To test this handbook and the methodology developed, a first group of 22 universities were selected (8 from Kenya, and 7 each from Tanzania and Uganda, see Annex) by the IUCEA. These universities had volunteered to participate in the pilot process and had appointed an internal QA-officer/coordinator/director. The QA personnel

were trained for two weeks in Germany in September 2007. The training consisted of an introduction to the handbook, case studies from the University of Oldenburg and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, as well as overarching information about the situation in Germany. Furthermore, input to QA processes from different stakeholders was presented. Additionally, the first part of the training included a session on how to deal with resistance to institutional reforms such as introduction of the QA system. In the end participants developed personal action plans indicating activities to be undertaken and timelines for the piloting process.

A model consisting of 22 indicators, ranging from learning outcomes to technical equipment, quality assurance methods employed at programme level to the qualifications of staff and students was used for the pilot self-assessment process. This was to be supplemented by a SWOT analysis as the final step of the self-evaluation process. To ease the process the programmes were to be selected from four broad fields of study: engineering, business, agriculture, and information technology. These fields were selected, on the one hand, because of their importance within the regional context. On the other hand, the possibility of benchmarking between the involved institutions was deemed to be better in those subject areas, which are – in terms of their academic and subject specific content standards – not so tied to national boundaries (as opposed to many social sciences). Most of the programmes selected by the institutions were in the field of business studies, followed by IT and agriculture equally.

After the QA personnel returned to East Africa from their training in Germany, the three national regulatory agencies organised national workshops for the deans of those faculties where the pilots were to be conducted so as to ensure a smooth flow of information and a good implementation of the processes. A second training session was held in East Africa at the end of January 2008. At this point progress reports were discussed and feedback was given. Furthermore, training was given on report writing and on how to work with questionnaires and interviews in data collection. Additionally, the deans of the faculties where the pilots were located were invited for a one-day seminar. A high-level forum involving the Tanzanian minister for higher education, science and technology, was organised for the deputy vice-chancellors responsible for academic affairs from the participating institutions.

As a side activity, before these events took place monitoring visits were conducted at all but one of the participating HEIs in Tanzania. During the seminar it became evident that some of the indicators used in the self-assessment would need further discussion. The notion of learning outcomes and their relation to QA processes posed a challenge for most institutions. It was decided that national workshops should be held in April 2008 to provide further feedback on the reports and discuss some issues stemming from the progress thus far. These workshops took place in Kenya and Tanzania in early April 2008, after which monitoring visits were conducted at some of the participating Kenyan HEIs, with the remaining being organised in July 2008. In Uganda, monitoring visits to the participating institutions took place in April 2008, and the workshop was to be organised at a later point in time.

Then a third training session was held in July 2008, comprising a detailed feedback of the self-assessment reports as well as training session on learning outcomes, and discussion about revisions to the developed methodology already underway as informed by the status of the pilots so far. It was also decided that, to streamline the internal QA processes in the East African region and to make them a regular activity of the institutions, a second cohort of institutions was to be selected for a second round of training activities and piloting. This group started the same training sequence in September 2008, a list of the institutions can be found in the annex. Furthermore, training for external peers was conducted in November 2008, with participants including some peers from Europe as resource people. This has involved pilot peer review visits as part of the training activity to approximately half of the institutions in the first cohort. A second phase is planned for February 2009. From there on external peer reviews of the pilot programmes will be conducted. A final training workshop for the first pilot group of QA personnel is due to start in January 2009, in order to discuss the results of the external assessment and the consequences to be drawn from that process, in terms of target agreements and enhancement-oriented activities such as improvement plans. That training workshop also includes participants of the second cohort of QA personnel, in order to exchange experiences with the first group.

The IUCEA and the national regulatory agencies have been taking more and more responsibility during the course of the project, especially with regards to the recruitment of peers and the maintenance of a database and the

respective organisation of the peer review activities to take place in the future as well as being more involved in the delivery of the training. To further ensure sustainability of the process, participants of the first cohort of QA personnel are increasingly employed as trainers for successive exercises, both within the framework of the current project and national and regional contexts.

### ***Results and Discussion***

The pilot projects have been carried out successfully in the participating institutions of the first cohort. Great interest in the activities has been evident and the support of the national regulatory agencies as well as HEI management (VCs, DVCs, Deans) has been crucial to ensure the smooth implementation of the process. Furthermore, it is to be noted that, for the majority of the institutions, this is the first time that such a comprehensive internal self assessment activity of its programmes has been carried out. This has been seen as extremely helpful by the institutions in identifying areas for improvement as well as existing strong practices. It has also become evident that in the majority of the institutions a number of QA practices are already in place and are part of the regular activities, but that so far these are not part of a structured approach. Most institutions are thus planning the development of such an approach and a general policy on quality assurance as well as the introduction of a respective office/bureau to support the development of a comprehensive IQA system and to support the faculties in their QA activities for the very near future. Similarly, the IUCEA has established a unit to coordinate the regional QA system being introduced.

The management of the HEIs has unanimously and independently of each other provided feedback which indicates the usefulness of the IQA activities for management decisions (including budget allocation) and further improvement of the academic performance of the programmes. The institutions plan to streamline the approach internally for other faculties and programmes, using the participants from the pilot project as internal trainers within the respective institutions. Some universities are also using experiences from the pilot self-assessment in carrying out the on-going curriculum review processes.

At a regional level the project facilitates the regional integration process of the higher education systems in East Africa. It has contributed to a regional integration process in higher education similar to the Bologna Process. This process is complemented by another project of the IUCEA and the national regulatory agencies, with the goal of developing a credit transfer and accumulation system for the region.

However, there have also been challenges in the running of the pilots. The timeline for the initial project was very intense given the fact that for most institutions both the activity and the approach used was completely new and unfamiliar territory. Furthermore, gaps in data have been found for some of the indicators, for example, exact drop-out and completion rates. These are largely due to deficiencies in the internal documentation and data analysis processes.

On the content level, as already discussed above, the notion and the use of learning outcomes has been a challenge for most institutions and programmes. While participants are used to preparing programme objectives, these are mainly expressed in terms of teaching intentions and input categories as opposed to student learning outcomes in terms of skills, competencies and attitudes. This issue is continuously addressed within the project framework. Last but not least, it has been a challenge for some institutions to receive feedback from stakeholders, especially employers, and to work with students as members of the internal self-assessment committees. For those institutions which successfully included one or both groups in the exercise, feedback so far has indicated that the involvement of stakeholders has been perceived as extremely helpful, as insights were given that would not necessarily arise within a group of professors, lecturers and researchers alone.

For the second group some adjustments were made in the sequencing of the training and the allocation of time to specific units based on these experiences. The start of the training of the second group has been very smooth and is bound to further contribute to reach a critical mass of all universities in the region so as to institutionalise and strengthen the system in a way that allows for long-term sustainability.

## **Conclusion**

It is indeed quite striking (or maybe not?) that the issues identified as challenges in the process of the pilot evaluations are very similar to those encountered by many universities in Europe when they engage on the journey towards an internal quality assurance system. This fact, as well as the smooth implementation and the positive feedback for the project so far, provides hope that further development of an East African approach to QA will take regional specificities into account and will also be compatible with practices in many other parts of the world, including a strong orientation and reference towards the European Standards and Guidelines. A further sustainable implementation of the IQA systems in East African higher education should thus also be conducive to increased competitiveness of higher education in the region as well as its compatibility with the European Higher Education Area, facilitating the exchange of staff and students as well as long-term university partnerships in a mutually beneficial way.

## **Annex**

### **List of participating institutions by country**

#### *Group 1 (Starting 2007)*

#### **Kenya**

Kenyatta University  
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology  
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology  
Maseno University  
Egerton University  
United States International University  
Daystar University  
Kenya Methodist University

#### **Uganda**

Makerere University  
Gulu University  
Mbarara University  
Busoga University  
Islamic University in Uganda  
Bugema University  
Nkumba University

#### **Tanzania**

University of Dar es Salaam  
Sokoine University of Agriculture  
Mzumbe University  
Ardhi University  
Open University of Tanzania  
St. Augustine University of Tanzania  
Tumaini University

*Group 2 (Starting 2008)*

**Burundi**

Université National du Burundi

**Kenya**

University of Nairobi

Moi University

University of East Africa; Baraton

Kabarak University

Catholic University of Eastern Africa

Africa Nazarene University

Strathmore University

St Paul's University

**Rwanda**

National University of Rwanda

**Tanzania**

University of Dodoma

State University of Zanzibar

St John's University of Tanzania

Muslim University of Morogoro

Hubert Kairuki Memorial University

Mkwawa University

Dar es Salaam University College of Education

Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences

**Uganda**

Kyambogo University

Uganda Martyrs University

Uganda Christian University

Ndejje University

Kampala University

Kampala International University

Lugazi University

Busitema University

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6. Quality Assurance and Accreditation System for Institutions and Programmes of Higher Education, Tanzania Commission for Universities

### 3. MEASURING PERFORMANCE, ASSURING QUALITY – TWO CHALLENGING TASKS

#### **The actors' lenses: on understanding prevailing conditions for introducing quality assurance measures in an institution**

*Ingrid Maria Hanken*<sup>1</sup>

##### **Introduction**

It is becoming increasingly common to ask students to evaluate teaching as a means of obtaining information for quality assurance in higher education. In this paper I will present results from a case study of a music academy which illustrate that implementing such quality assurance measures does not always work according to plan, and I will argue that these findings may be applicable to other types of higher education institutions as well.

This study was carried out in response to the 1994 decision of the Norwegian higher education authorities to make student evaluation of teaching mandatory. As a member of the academic staff at the Norwegian Academy of Music, I became involved in implementing this new procedure at my institution.<sup>2</sup>

It soon became obvious that certain problems concerning student evaluation were emerging, especially in relation to individual instrumental tuition. This type of tuition can, in many ways, be viewed as part of an apprenticeship tradition. Typical characteristics in this respect are the strong and autonomous position of the instrumental teachers within the institution, and their high level of professional authority vis-à-vis their students. In many cases the teachers also serve as mentors for their students, a fact which further serves to shape this as a master-apprentice relationship (see Burwell 2005; Gaunt 2006; Hays et al. 2000; Kingsbury 1988; Nerland 2003; Nettle 1995; Nielsen 1998; Presland 2005). There are a variety of different ways in which these characteristics could potentially exert a negative influence on student evaluation of teaching.

Most music students consider the individual instrumental tuition to be the most important subject in their studies (Nerland 2003; Nielsen 1998; Plasket 1992). Obviously, then, it is a matter of some concern if student evaluation of teaching in this particular subject does not contribute to quality, or even worse has a detrimental effect. It was clear that more knowledge was needed in order to understand and remedy the problems. A literature review revealed that very little research has been conducted on student evaluation of individual tuition/supervision in general, and instrumental tuition in particular.

##### **Research questions and methodology**

This is the background for my decision to conduct an exploratory study to investigate the problems we had encountered. My main research question was how instrumental teachers and their students perceive, experience and practice student evaluation of individual instrumental tuition. I conducted semi-structured research interviews with nine experienced teachers and with a total of nine students studying with three of these teachers. For a more detailed discussion of the research study and its methodology, see Hanken (2007).

##### **Theoretical background**

The research study was based on the initial assumption that certain characteristics of instrumental tuition may influence how student evaluation is perceived, experienced and practiced. In light of this, it was relevant to employ organisational theory for theoretical support. The focus in this study was on cultural characteristics connected to instrumental tuition, such as the norms, values, traditions and conceptions that operate within the institution, and how these could influence student evaluation. For this purpose, (neo-) institutional theory was seen as potentially fruitful, as it illuminates how the cultural characteristics of an organisation provide their own forces and motives to processes such as, in this case, introducing student evaluation of teaching (see Brunsson 1989; DiMaggio & Powell

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1991; March & Olsen 1984, 1989; Meyer & Rowan 1991, 1992; Olsen 1992; Peters 1999).

Institutional theory can be understood as a reaction to a dominant conception of organisations as unambiguous and rational, where the members' behaviour is seen as controlled by formalised structures, objectives, rules, sanctions etc. Institutional theory, in contrast, emphasises the importance of subjective, interpretative processes when members are expected to implement changes. The members are influenced by values, norms, and ways of thinking and acting which permeate the organisation and influence the way in which they interpret the demands, and consequently, how they will choose to act. A rationalistic understanding of organisations builds on a "logic of consequences"; the members' actions are governed by rational deliberations as to what consequences their actions will have. Institutional theory builds on a different logic, a "logic of appropriateness", where the members do what they consider to be *appropriate* in relation to their role within the organisation. This, in turn, is influenced by values, norms, routines, unwritten rules and traditions within the organisation that create taken-for-granted expectations towards the behaviour and actions of the individual member. Through identification and socialisation these traits will emerge as "natural" and "the right thing to do"; they will create "...the lenses through which actors view the world and the very categories of structure, action, and thought" (DiMaggio & Powell 1991:13).

If behaviour in an organisation is governed by a "logic of appropriateness" rather than by formalised, rational structure, the question of organisational change becomes much more complicated. When values, identity and perceptions of reality are embedded in the organisation, change is likely to be met with resistance. Institutional theory is therefore in many ways a theory about why an organisation does *not* change, or does not change as intended. This research study is about an intended change – implementing student evaluation – which did not work according to plan. Institutional theory will here focus on the "lenses" of teachers and students when confronted with the demand for change, and how they actively interpret this demand in light of the prevailing "logic of appropriateness" in their institution.

### **Results**

Judging from the results there are certain institutionally embedded values, norms, traditions and conceptions concerning roles and relationships in instrumental tuition that pose obstacles to establishing the position of and function for student evaluation within this particular educational context. I will discuss three such obstacles here.

#### **First obstacle: The need for trust and authority**

The education of musicians is often described as learning by apprenticeship (Burwell 2005; Gaunt 2006; Nerland 2003; Nielsen 1998). The instrumental teachers are, or have been, professional musicians, and this is what gives them a high level of professional authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the students. The teacher "manifests" the profession and it is through him/her the student gains access to professional practice (Nerland 2003). Furthermore, studying with a renowned musician/–teacher also in itself gives status to the student (Kingsbury 1988; Roberts 1991). Therefore, if learning by apprenticeship is to be effective, the student must trust his/her teacher and accept his/her authority as a professional (Gaunt 2006; Nerland 2003; Nielsen 1998). The results from this study strongly support this conclusion, but also reveal how difficult it can be to combine this trust with student evaluation of teaching. One of the teachers expressed her concerns in this way:

It is not natural for the Master to ask for an evaluation, because the Master is, by definition, a Master. [...] Student evaluation is not perceived as natural within the master-apprentice tradition, it just isn't; you only destroy yourself.

This teacher feels as if she is undermining her own authority by asking the student to evaluate her teaching. Moreover, students may find it difficult to combine the exercise of an appraising and dispassionate attitude with the need to maintain a strong professional trust in their teacher. This dilemma was illustrated by one of the students:

In my opinion, putting up too much resistance against the teacher or the type of system he has just doesn't work, especially in the type of teaching tradition that we have. I think you have to decide to go along with him entirely, otherwise you have to find yourself another teacher.



This illustrates how students make a deliberate choice to trust their teacher. The importance of this unconditional trust is underlined by Polanyi in his book *Personal knowledge* (1958:53), where he writes "You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness." The authority is not suppressive; the students *choose* to submit themselves, and the authority may be understood as a productive and essential learning resource in this type of teaching (Nerland 2003).

Here it is the very *premise* underlying student evaluation – that students should assume a dispassionate and appraising attitude – which may come into conflict with the students', and sometimes also the teachers', "logic of appropriateness". In other words, it is not the teacher's formal authority or role as a Master per se which stands in the way, but rather fundamental and constitutive traits in instrumental tuition that make it difficult for student evaluation to fit the logic of what is "right" and "natural" in the teacher-student relationship.

### **Second obstacle: close and vulnerable relationships**

Research literature on instrumental teaching stresses the importance of an unstrained relationship between teacher and student if teaching and learning are to succeed (Gaunt 2006; Nielsen 1998; Presland 2005). In many cases the relationship will extend beyond a teacher-student relationship, because the teacher also becomes a mentor who helps and supports in both personal and career matters (Hays et al. 2000; Presland 2005). It was also confirmed in the present study that the relationships often become very close and extensive. As an example one of the students described her relationship to her teacher as "almost a parent-child relationship".

Based on this, one can presume that the relationship between instrumental teacher and student is delicately balanced, and that both parties have something to lose if the relationship becomes embittered. The question is whether this will also influence student evaluation, bearing in mind that such evaluations in this teaching context are in reality non-anonymous. This presumption was confirmed by both students and teachers who underlined that the need for an unstrained relationship will influence the students' willingness to conduct any evaluations, as well as their honesty and frankness in the event they agree to do so. This is illustrated by one of the teachers:

In a way you have to attach more importance to any hint of objection that crops up, and then decide whether this is only a considerate way of saying that this is hopeless, because they don't dare to express themselves more strongly.

The students confirmed that their anxiety not to hurt or irritate the teacher made it more difficult to voice any criticism in this subject than in class teaching. One-to-one teaching apparently entails the expectation that students will be considerate, which causes them to be careful about what they say and how they express themselves to their teacher. Tiberius & Flak (1999) also state that one-to-one teaching represents a special challenge in this respect. They claim that it is more difficult to give expression to tensions, conflicts and disappointment in one-to-one teaching than in classroom teaching and that such feelings will therefore often be masked by overt civility.

It is a general research finding that teacher involvement and a constructive relationship between teacher and student will positively influence both learning outcomes and the overall development of the student (Endo & Harpel 1982; Lublin & Barrand 1987; Pascarella 1980; Tiberius & Bilson 1991). The importance of a constructive and unstrained relationship is, in other words, not unique to instrumental teaching. However, there may be some characteristics of this particular subject which make it particularly vital to maintain a positive relationship. This is illustrated in the following quote from an interview with one of the teachers:

With regard to having a close relationship – a lot of people say that the teacher-student relationship should not become too personal, but I find that difficult to regulate. We talk a lot about real feelings during the lessons, not just 4th finger on F sharp [...]. We talk about what this music expresses. It might sound sentimental, but you have to open up your whole register of feelings, and then you cannot just sit there and keep a distance from the student. [...] you cannot be close in your teaching without becoming close as a human being.

In a subject where personal expression is part of *the subject*, both students and teachers need to feel that there is a positive and unstrained atmosphere for the teaching to be effective, because conflicts and negative feelings may have a detrimental impact on the actual teaching and learning. The awareness of this fact appears to generate strong expectations of reciprocal civil and considerate behaviour. In this context, the expression of critical views on teaching could clearly be understood as “inappropriate”.

### **Third obstacle: Modes of communication**

The most common procedure for student evaluation of teaching is using anonymous, standardised questionnaires. This was also the chosen procedure in the case institution; the teachers were expected to hand out a questionnaire to the students towards the end of the academic year, and the students were expected to deliver them back in the teachers' mailboxes. Of the nine teachers interviewed, seven said that they did not hand out any questionnaire. The reason they gave was mainly that they do not get them back from the students anyway. Results indicate that the *content* of the questionnaire was not the problem; both teachers and students interviewed perceived the questions as relevant. The problem was rather that the *mode* of communication implied by a written questionnaire was perceived as an alien way of communicating, and as somewhat redundant. Both students and teacher stress that there is usually an ongoing dialogue between instrumental teachers and their students on different aspects of teaching and learning. In light of this, a written mode of communication is perceived as “strange”, to quote one of the students:

It would be a bit strange to hand over a questionnaire to your instrumental teacher. It works better in theoretical subjects. There is so much personal contact all the way, and having to write down your comments on a piece of paper...

Reactions such as this may be one explanation why many students do not turn the questionnaires in to their teachers.

The *anonymity* of the questionnaire is also perceived as a problem by teachers as well as students. Guidelines and handbooks for student evaluation usually recommend that such evaluations should be conducted anonymously. This is based on research indicating that students give somewhat more positive evaluations when they are not anonymous (Blunt 1991; Feldman 1979; Fries & McNinch 2003), which will influence the validity negatively. In individual instrumental tuition it may prove very difficult to protect the students' anonymity. Both students and teachers agreed that the teachers know their students so well that they can identify them by the way the students answer, particularly if invited to write comments in their own words. The students are well aware that they can be identified, so they will give essentially the same evaluation in an anonymous questionnaire as they would in an open evaluation. The anonymity actually becomes a problem in itself in two ways in this context: *First* an anonymous evaluation is perceived as rather pointless in a subject where the main purpose of student evaluation is precisely to help teachers adapt their teaching to the needs and goals of the individual student. Anonymous evaluations frustrate the teachers, because they prevent them from discussing and clarifying the students' evaluations. They also frustrate the students, because they have no way of knowing if they have been heard and understood. *Second*, the entire exercise is perceived as an “act”, where both parties know that the other part knows, but where the anonymity prevents a discussion in the open. Teachers and students feel uncomfortable in this situation; especially since there is a prevailing expectation that the relationship between an instrumental teacher and his/her students should be so open and trusting that the students can raise any problems face to face with their teacher.

Therefore, a procedure for student evaluation which is anonymous and in writing appears to be in conflict with certain norms and values in instrumental tuition which regulate the understanding of how the communication and the relationship between teacher and student “should” be. In a subject which to a large extent is based on mutual trust, where teaching in many ways takes the shape of a continuous dialogue (Nerland 2003), it is considered “unnatural” and “inappropriate” that the student once a year should give anonymous evaluations in writing to his/her own teacher.

### **Conclusion**

The results from this case study indicate that there are certain taken-for-granted expectations as to what is considered appropriate behaviour and relationships in individual instrumental tuition, expectations that may have a strong negative impact on student evaluation. These expectations appear to be culturally embedded in this institution, and provide a set of forces and motives that affects student evaluation, as predicted by institutional theory.

The question remains: are the results from this case study relevant for other higher education institutions? I would argue that they can be generalised to three different contexts. *First* to the many other music education institutions<sup>3</sup> which provide instrumental tuition within an apprenticeship tradition. Judging from the response this research study has received, the results are highly relevant to understanding the challenges such institutions face when introducing student evaluation of teaching. *Second* to other forms of individual tuition, especially in the arts, but also to different forms of supervision. I would argue that obstacles similar to the three described above may be encountered, for example, in the supervision of doctoral students, when asking these students to give evaluations. *Third*, I would also suggest that the study may have some relevance for higher education institutions in general in that it highlights the importance of understanding the prevailing “logic of appropriateness” in an institution when implementing changes in procedures. In my view, institutional theory provides a fruitful perspective which can help us to discover, understand, and therefore also counteract the stumbling blocks that may arise when implementing quality assurance measures.

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<sup>3</sup> The European Association for Conservatoires and Music Academies (AEC) have more than 260 member institutions.

## **A proposal for a performance indicator model for the Spanish higher education system**

*Anna Prades<sup>1</sup>, Sebastian Rodríguez<sup>2</sup>*

### ***The use of higher education indicators: rankings and performance indicators***

Both rankings and performance indicators are data processing tools that encompass certain aspects of the current state of Higher Education, and, therefore, use many of the same pointers. However, they differ according to who implements them, why, who they used for, and how the indicators are processed.

University rankings are lists of certain groupings of institutions (usually, but not always, within a single national jurisdiction) that are ranked comparatively according to a common set of indicators in descending order (Usher 2007:5). Most rankings are produced by journals, newspapers or book publishers, and their aim is to inform and help prospective students choose the institution where they hope carry out their higher education studies. Although the initial proliferation of national university rankings was in countries where there is a basically private and competitive university system (such as the US, UK and countries in Asia-Pacific region), the internationalisation of higher education has also seen their penetration in countries where there is a public university system (such as Germany, Spain and Italy), and where the myth that quality is the same for all universities is still extensive.

Performance indicators (PIs) had their origin in external evaluations by government authorities for funding distribution purposes. Since the 1980s, the use of performance indicators in post-secondary education has multiplied across OECD countries (OCUFA, 2006). They are produced by government authorities and quality assurance agencies, and they fulfil different purposes: they contribute to the public accountability of higher education by providing reliable information on the nature and performance of higher education institutions, they inform on policy developments, they provide for comparison between individual institutions of a similar nature, where appropriate, and they enable institutions to benchmark their own performance (HESA, 2008). In short, PIs are very useful for two important purposes: funding and quality assessment (Jongbloed, 1994).

Dochy et al. (1990) pointed out that indicators represent an element for dialogue between universities and government. As an initial approximation, it could be said that a performance indicator is any type of empirical data, all the better if it is quantitative, that gives information on the level of success of an institutional objective or aim.

Performance indicators are empirical data of a qualitative or quantitative nature. These data become performance indicators if they express the contemplated actor's goals. This means that they have a contextual as well as a temporal importance. (Dochi, 1990, p.136)

Given the need for any indicator to be in relation to an objective or aim, and given the diversity of actors and perspectives that exist in the institutional framework, it comes as no surprise that certain data are mere statistics for some and indicators for others (Rodríguez, 2007).

While the reliability and validity of rankings have been extensively discussed (Dill, 2005; Van Dyke, 2005; Usher, 2007), there is much less literature on performance indicators. After analysing the problems with rankings, Bowden (2000) pointed to the HEFCE's PI model, which is currently published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), as a possible alternative. PIs would thus appear to come off better than rankings, which seem to get a bad press; moreover, in a recent European Commission document, the recommendation was made for member states to focus funding on relevant outputs rather than on inputs (CEC, 2006: 7).

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Despite the undeniable interest in linking funding with the ability to demonstrate the quality of academic programmes (performance funding), the on-going development of PI models in the US points to the need for caution: in 1979, Tennessee was the first state to apply performance funding (Banta, 1985), and the model then spread to other states with a peak just after 2000, when the balance began to tip towards the use of the performance reporting model, which does not link funding to results. OCUFA (2006) attributes this phenomenon to the fact that the desirability of performance funding in theory is matched by its difficulty in practice.

The fact is that performance indicators neither rank nor weight indicators, and they are therefore exempt from the inconsistencies generated by arbitrary weighting, although there are problems with them in terms of data reliability, and they do face the same challenges as rankings with regard to offering valid information on the quality of higher education.

Rankings have been accused of being largely invalid because they are based mainly on institutional resources or inputs, which educational research has shown to have only minimal relevance in relation to what we know about the impact of college on students (Dill, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. Jongbloed (1994) has pointed out the same limitations in an analysis of PI models in Europe, with many PIs focusing solely on resources, although performance should be assessed by comparing outputs and effects with inputs.

Table 1 compares five performance indicator models and classifies the indicators in terms of inputs, processes and outputs. The following models are analysed:

- The *Higher Education Statistics Agency* (HESA) ([www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk)) is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information on publicly funded higher education in the UK. Performance indicators provide comparative data on the performance of institutions in widening participation, student retention, learning and teaching outcomes, research output and employment of graduates. Indicators are displayed separately according to the student characteristics and full/part-time study
- In Australia, the *Department of Education, Science and Training* (DEST) ([www.dest.gov.au](http://www.dest.gov.au)) is responsible for producing performance indicators, in a country where the use of PIs for measuring quality and institutional funding purposes began during the nineties. DEST attempts to create a “level playing field” by removing differences in university performance due to exogenous factors that are beyond the control of the institutions (such as age and gender mix of students, or social demographic factors) (DEST, 2005). A high percentage of indicators are based on student and graduate opinion polls
- The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) (<http://hsv.se/>) is the official agency responsible for the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistical resources on higher education. HE institutions provide the agency with data for use in its quality assurance processes, which are then published in the Agency's National Monitoring Database (NU)
- In the US, the *National Center for Higher Education Management Systems* (NCHEMS) (<http://www.higheredinfo.org>) provides higher education policymakers and analysts with the data and information needed to make sound policy decisions, and offers comparative data for states and counties, as well as some contextual information. It publishes the *Measuring Up* reports, which are state rankings, on the basis that “it is the states that are primarily responsible for educational access and quality in the United States” (<http://measuringup.highereducation.org/default.cfm>)
- The UNEIX inter-university information system in Catalonia (Spain) is the result of a process carried out jointly by the Government of Catalonia's Commission for Universities and Research and the seven public universities in Catalonia to improve the statistical information used for analyses, planning, programming and decision-making in the public university system in Catalonia.

<sup>3</sup> One interesting proposal is that of the Russian Association for Engineering Education (RAEE), which proposes rankings divided according to defined graduate training fields, and presupposes an integral assessment of universities according to their resources, processes, and activity outcomes (see Pokholkov et al. (2007:39-41)).

	HESA (UK)	DEST (Aus)	HSE (Swe)	NCHEMS (US)	UNEIX (Sp)
<b>INPUT</b>					
Students – gender and age	X	X	X	X	X
Students - origin (foreigners/ethnic group)	X	X	X		
Students – social class (socio-economic status)	X	X	X	X	
Student quality: qualifying grade, way of access, etc.		X			X
Affordability				X	
Total expenditure		X	X		
Teachers: no. of teaching and research staff, gender and others characteristics		X	X		X
<b>PROCESS</b>					
Student-staff ratio		X			
Full-time students	X	X	X		X
Teaching quality		X			
<b>OUTPUTS</b>					
<b>Personal</b>					
Student satisfaction (overall)		X			
Generic skills		X			
<b>Academic</b>					
Drop-out rates	X	X		X	X
Progress rates		X			X
Graduation rates	X			X	X
Quality: degrees and credentials awarded				X	
<b>Professional</b>					
Graduate salary		X			
Graduate full-time employment / % employment	X	X			
Employment quality index (EQI)					X <sup>4</sup>
<b>Research</b>					
Results of research assessment exercise	X				

Table 1. Comparison of performance indicator models

As Table 1 shows, all of the models use various input indicators, although there is a difference in the degree to which they actually characterise the types of students entering the university.

The indicators that refer to the type of students have a twofold role: on the one hand, they are used to control any possible effect on the outcomes (graduation rates, etc), and, on the other, they serve to monitor student access, learning and teaching outcomes and the transition to the labour market of non-conventional social groups in higher education, and thereby provide information for socio-educational policy-making.

Only two indicators refer to the process. The process is, in these models, a “black box” that only provides information on the discipline and the university attended. This means that differential variables are available on entry into the higher education system and performance indicators relating to outcomes, but there is no information on the elements in the teaching and learning process that have an impact on these outcomes. Dill’s criticisms (2005) about rankings in relation to the validity of indicators are therefore completely valid for PI models.

<sup>4</sup> This indicator is not one of the usual indicators in the UNEIX database. It has been introduced for the first time in this study using the 2005 study on the labour market outcomes of graduates from public universities in Catalonia (www.aqu.cat).

### *Pilot test scheme in Catalonia: the interaction between input and outcome indicators*

The outcomes of the bi-variate tests between three performance indicators and the differential variables available in the UNEIX indicator system are summarised in Table 2 (on page 54).

The three performance indicators are defined as follows:

- **Progress rate:** this is defined as the percentage rate of credits that the student obtains out of the total number enrolled for. The progress rate is an indicator which has economic implications: the lower the progress rate, the more inefficient the system as it comes out of both the student's own pocket and that of the state, the cost of enrolment not being covered by the real cost of the credits taught. The progress rate gives no information on the quality of student progress, but on efficiency in the enrolment strategy
- **Drop-out rate:** A student is considered to have dropped out if he/she makes no formal registration within two consecutive years of a previous registration. This gives information on the institution's efficiency. There are two main types of drop-out:
  - Students that re-enter the university system: either due to the **breaking off** of their studies (return to the same degree programme and university), **a change of direction** in a student's studies (a change of degree programme, but not of university), or **mobility** (change of university, but not of degree programme)
  - No re-entry or due to **failure:** characterised by students who, two years later, have totally dropped out of the university system
- The **employment quality index (EQI)** is defined as follows:

$$\text{Employment quality index} = f [(C + I + W) * S] * 100$$

where C refers to the type of contract, I is income or salary, W the suitability of work in relation to the studies taken, and S is satisfaction<sup>5</sup>.

The index provides information on the quality of graduate employment three years after graduation, in other words, the degree to which the graduate labour market outcomes are satisfactory. This is subject however to economic forces that are beyond the control of the universities (Prades, 2005).

The following conclusions can be made from Table 2:

- The results show that it is incorrect to use global indicators according to university, on the basis of the same reasoning used to criticise global rankings (Federkeil, 2002; Dill, 2005). The discipline is a key variable in all of the indicators analysed
- The quality of in-coming students (assessed according to qualifying grade and entry requirements) only affects the type of drop-out, but not the progress efficiency (progress rate) or employment quality
- As can be seen, differences were observed in two out of the three indicators in behaviour according to university. There are only differences between some universities however, and these are hard to interpret due to the difficulty of isolating the institutional factor from other factors that also have an influence, such as the quality of in-coming students, gender, etc
- What is the best analytical unit for making comparisons between universities? The answer will vary according to which variables affect the outcomes. Ideally the groups to be compared should be homogenised; for example, a comparison of the progress rate of females studying Engineering with a qualifying grade higher than 7 and with parents with a higher education between University A and University B
- One interesting finding is that performance in the outcome indicators can go in opposite directions. Progress efficiency indicators (speed) are thus not necessarily linked to a high rate of employment quality, as this is positively affected by employment in related work during studies. It is also probable that satisfaction indicators are independent of organisation efficiency indicators.

<sup>5</sup> The index allocates the same weighting to the contract, income/salary and suitability variables, on the basis that there is no objective reason for any of these to be given a higher weighting, whereas satisfaction is considered to be a key factor in determining quality, as it enables the appraisal made by the worker/employee concerning his/her job to be made known (for more details, see Corominas et al, 2007).

	<b>Progress rate</b>	<b>Drop-out type</b>	<b>Employment quality index</b>
<b>Entry qualifying grade</b>	No relationship found.	n.a.	No relationship found.
<b>Way of access</b>	No relationship found.	There is a higher drop-out without re-entry rate than expected among students taking university access courses where the main purpose of preparation was for something other than higher education (vocational training), and a lower rate than expected for those from higher secondary education courses ( <i>batxillerat</i> ).	No relationship found.
<b>Discipline/Field of knowledge</b>	Health Sciences have significantly higher performance rates (81%) than other fields of knowledge, followed by Experimental Sciences (70%), Humanities and Social Sciences (with rates of around 67%), and Engineering and Architecture (64%).	Drop-out type is very closely related to the discipline, except for Health Sciences:  In Humanities and Social Sciences, there are more drop-outs without re-entry than expected (failure) and a lower drop-out with re-entry rate  In Experimental Sciences and Engineering and Architecture, the situation is the opposite.	The employment quality index is clearly higher in Engineering and Architecture (65%), followed by Health Sciences (62%), Experimental Sciences and Social Sciences (around 50%), and, lastly, Humanities (46%).
<b>University</b>	University seems to be a determining factor in progress rates; for example, the differences in progress rate range from 93.9% to 62% in Experimental Sciences. These differences are difficult to interpret, however, because there are other significant differences between universities, such as the entry qualifying grade or the parents' level of studies.	This is only associated with drop-out due to mobility, with there being more mobility among non-metropolitan universities.	This is not a determining factor as compared with the discipline (Messina, 2007).
<b>Gender</b>	The mean progress rate is higher for females (73%) than for males (63%). According to fields of knowledge, the differences between males and females are lower in Health Sciences (4 percentage points) and higher in Social Sciences (12 points).	The only differences are in Engineering and Architecture, where there is a higher drop-out rate than expected among females due to a change in studies and a lower rate due to failure.	The differences between males and females are no higher than 4 points, but they are systematically on the side of males in all areas, except for Humanities.
<b>Parents' level of studies</b>	The progress rate of students having parents with a higher education degree is significantly higher (72%) than for other students (63-69%).	There is a higher failure rate than expected among students from families with just a primary school education, and a lower rate than expected where at least one of the parents has had a higher education.	n.a.
<b>Student type</b>	The progress rate is higher for full-time students (69%) than for part-time students (59%).	n.a.	Employment during studies in a field related to the student's studies is associated with a higher employment quality index (AQU, 2008).

Table 2. List of the performance indicators with differential variables (Barà et al., 2008)  
n.a. – not available (no test was possible)



### ***A performance indicator model for the Spanish university system***

Table 3 gives the proposal for an indicator model for the Spanish university system following a comparison of the data that are currently available and those used at the international level, together with the results of the pilot study that was carried out.

<b>Outcome indicators</b>	<b>Differential variables</b>
1. Progress rate of first academic year	Discipline
2. Progress rate	Gender
3. Mean duration of studies	Parents' level of studies and profession
4. Graduation rate	Ethnic/cultural origin
5. Drop-out rate without re-entry and with re-entry (change of studies, mobility and breaking off of studies)	Age (mature student group) Entry qualifying grade
6. Student record average	Way of access and pre-university secondary education courses ( <i>batxillerat</i> )
7. Employment quality index	Student type (full/part-time)
8. Student satisfaction	University

*Table 3. Proposal: performance indicators for the Spanish Higher Education system*

In relation to the **outcome indicators**, three new indicators have been added to those already included in the UNEIX database:

- the first year progress rate, as this is an indicator of how the transition to higher education works, which theoretically will be more closely associated with variables on the quality of in-coming students
- the student record average, which is the PI that conceptually should be associated with the students' entry qualifying grade
- student satisfaction and their university experience, as shown in models such as the DEST (2005) and CHE-ranking (Federkeil, 2002).

In terms of **differential variables**, we believe it absolutely necessary to control whether students are full or part-time when analysing the duration of studies, graduation rate, etc. Moreover, bearing in mind the trends detected within the international context, we feel that it would be interesting to include the indicators for monitoring groups of students from families of foreign origin and groups of mature students.

The model that is set out includes five indicators that deal with the institution's efficiency (two progress rates, the duration rate, the graduation rate and the drop-out rate), one indicator on the academic quality of *outputs* (student record average), one indicator on the quality of employment/labour market outcomes, and one on the satisfaction of the "users" of the system. As has been said before, there may be inconsistent behaviour between these types of outcome, for example, a low progress rate but a high EQI rate. Likewise, student satisfaction (for example, with the quality of teaching and learning processes) does not necessarily need to be associated with efficiency rates nor the employment quality index.

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## Criteria identification for study programme quality assessment and ranking

Dainis Dosbergs<sup>1</sup>, Juris Borzovs<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Quality assurance is not a new term in higher education around the world. European higher education will have to demonstrate that quality and accreditation is not the only form of quality assurance. Criteria and standards are the core of quality assessment (ENQA, 2003; ENQA, 2005; Griffith, 2008, p.102). European Union and governments call for quality evaluation and the improvement of higher education institutions (HEI) as well as the improvement of HEI study programme content and realisation.

Rankings of the Higher Education Institutions of the world have become more popular during recent years. Rankings provide consumers with results of higher education institutions analysis, foster healthy competition, stimulate evaluation etc. Negative aspects of rankings are often highlighted in academic society, but rankings are here to stay regardless of negative judgements. (Sadlak, 2006, p.3; Liu & Cheng, 2005, p.136; Hazelkorn, 2008) The International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) considered a set of quality and good practice principles in HEI rankings known as the Berlin Principles on ranking of higher education institutions to minimise negative judgements and formalise ranking methodologies.

In the last two years, rankings of Latvia's higher education institutions were created. The last one gave cause for widespread discussions about the aim and criteria selection of rankings. The aim of this research was to define the set of criteria that can be used for quality evaluation and ranking of study programmes.

### University ranking – world experience

#### Times Higher-QS World University Ranking

One of the world's most recognised university rankings is the Times Higher Education Supplement-QS World University Ranking also called Times-QS. The ranking has different formats: worlds' best 100 universities, worlds' top 400 universities, Europe's top 150, UK top and USA top. The ranking is based on the following criteria:

- research quality, peer review, 40% impact on total score
- research quality, citations per faculty, 20%
- graduate employability, 10%
- international outlook, international faculty, 5%
- international outlook, international students, 5%
- teaching quality, student faculty ratio, 20%

For the highest evaluation of each indicator the scoring of 100 was given, whereas the rest of scorings were calculated as a percentage of the highest scoring.

Times-QS ranking is based on the world's best researcher and employer references. During the process of this ranking more than 5000 active academics from every continent and various academic areas were interviewed. In the last stage, scientific activity is evaluated using Scopus, which ensures a more precise information search specifically for universities (in the early days of the ranking ESI was used, however once Scopus appeared it became non-competitive). (O'Leary, Quacquarelli and Ince, 2008, p.88)

Despite comments about being more favourable to well known universities and ignoring the emerging of new university names, Times-QS ranking represents all continents, 101 countries and all the main scientific directions. (O'Leary, Quacquarelli and Ince, 2008)

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However, the authors believe that this ranking provides more information about the prestige of the universities rather than the quality of the study process. Moreover, the results show only the position of the university in the given list but they do not allow for an analysis of the quality of the university according to the ideas of the rank creators.

### **Academic Ranking of World Universities**

Academic Ranking of World Universities, also known as ARWU, was created by the Centre for World-class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. This ranking is one of worlds' most recognised rankings. Higher education institutions are evaluated via the following criteria:

- quality of Education, Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Field Medals, 10% impact on total score
- quality of Faculty, Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Field Medals, 20%
- quality of Faculty, Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories, 20%
- research Output, Articles published in Nature and Science, 20%
- research Output, Articles indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded, and Social Science Citation Index, 20%
- per capita academic performance of an institution, 10%.

ARWU basically represents academic and research performance of the higher education institution. Just like in the Times-QS ranking, the highest scoring institution is assigned a score of 100, and the scores of the other institutions are calculated as a percentage of the top score.

### **CHE University Ranking**

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) and the German weekly news magazine "DIE ZEIT" created the German university ranking. This ranking is also known as CHE University Ranking. The ranking provides information about over 130 universities and over 150 universities of applied sciences in Germany. In the ranking are included judgements of about 300,000 students and 31,000 professors, but does not included a survey of employers.

Unlike the Times-QS and ARWU this ranking gives the possibility of evaluating universities according to the provided study areas as well as the location of the university. Furthermore, besides various criteria which are used for the ranking, it is also possible to receive sufficiently detailed information about study programmes. The research material for this ranking is provided by student questionnaires, professor opinions and statistical data. There are several ways of reviewing the data of this ranking: 'Ranking overview', 'University comparison', 'My ranking' and 'Ups and Downs'. Each of those views use a different set of criteria – one is mostly based on student/professor opinion, the other on university data. More than 150 criteria are used for the preparation of the ranking. Criteria are taken from the following categories:

- job market and career-orientation
- equipment
- research
- overall opinions
- international orientation
- result of study
- study location and higher education institution
- students
- academic studies and teaching.

One of ranking representation methods – 'Ranking overview', includes selected 30 criteria that are more interesting for those who use the ranking instead of detailed information according to the idea of the developers of the ranking. The selected criteria are grouped into following groups:

- overall study situation
- counselling
- IT infrastructure
- third party funds
- research reputation.

The results of the criteria evaluation of each group are put in one of the three value classes: top, middle and bottom. The exact values of the ranking are almost never used in the review. The authors believe that such an evaluation is easier to interpret for the users of the ranking.

'University comparison' allows users to choose up to three universities and to view all criteria results of each university in a comparison table. These results include the relevance to value classes and the calculated value of each criterion.

'My Ranking' allows the reader to sort and place universities according to his/her own chosen five main criteria. There is also an option setoff setting the lowest border for each evaluation. Such a choice can be made from more than 20 criteria whose results are collected from a student and professor questionnaire.

The list of "Ups and Downs" allows one to review universities which have either improved or worsened their results in any of previously mentioned five groups compared to the previous period.

The authors believe that the information provided by this ranking as well as the possibilities given by the web page provide users with qualitative comparative information about the universities. However, the predominance of criteria is a limitation, because the results are obtained using student questionnaires.

### **CHE Excellence Ranking**

The second ranking, created by the CHE, is a ranking of excellent European graduate programmes, also called the CHE Excellence Ranking.

This ranking contains information about top European universities with at least one of four evaluated disciplines: biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics. This ranking is an attempt by the CHE to create a European universities ranking.

The selection of European universities is based on the assessment of four criteria:

- citations
- number of projects in the Marie Curie research promotion programme of the EU
- number of highly cited authors and Nobel Prize winners
- number of publications in international journals.

The ranking also includes additional criteria that are more used for information purposes than for ranking, for example, such criteria as size of university/faculty and amount of equipment.

The ranking creators use three groups (gold, silver and bronze) for HEIs classification. This method allows for a lesser risk of casual fluctuations which would result in real differences in HEIs ranking.

### **University Ranking in Latvia**

In 2008, the first publication on higher education ranking in Latvia emerged. The author – a master student at the University of Latvia – researched the data from the Ministry of Education and Science 2007 annual report and university web pages creating a ranking with nine indicators (LA, 2008):

- student faculty ratio
- graduate density
- density of Academic staff members with Doctors degree
- density of Academic staff members
- academic staff age structure
- density of students from abroad
- density of scientific staff members
- citation per faculty.

This ranking was similar to the Times-QS. Slightly different criteria were chosen to the World University Rankings. After the publication of this research, members of higher education institutions roundly criticised it and pointed out the following weaknesses: lack of independent approach, lack of substantiation for chosen criteria and comparison of different profile higher education institutions by the similar criteria (Delfi, 2008; Oborune, 2008; Rozenbaha, 2008).

Although a part of the criteria used in the Latvian higher education institution ranking is statistical, some of the same data is also used in the evaluation of the study programmes, such as the evaluation of academic staff and the age structure. It is important in the evaluation process of scientific actions to take into consideration that the research is carried out by the academic staff working with the study programme. In addition, only educational institutions which work in research should evaluate scientific actions. The authors believe that the main problem with the Latvian higher educational institution ranking is the generality of the results, as it is difficult to identify the difference between the 1st (100%) and the 15th (30,7%) place in the ranking.

### ***Rankings and quality***

The results of rankings analysis described in this section are to be considered and some of them should be included in the methodology of study programme quality evaluation and ranking.

The Times-QS and ARWU represent the global competition and the globalisation of higher education. Ranking creators state the difficulty of collecting data about world HEIs. This is one of the reasons why a small number of criteria are used. ARWU creators also use only comparable third-party data. On the other hand, the methodology of both CHE rankings tries to use as many different criteria as possible.

The CHE ranking creators and Garvin stated that the aggregation at the level of whole universities offers no useful information that can be used as a decision-making aid for prospective students who want to study a specific subject. (Garvin, 1987, p.104) Therefore, in CHE rankings information at levels of faculty can be accessed, unlike Times-QS and ARWU where universities are inspected as a whole.

The next conclusion is related to the subjectivity of measurement. The Times-QS has a large subjective criterion called 'peer-review' with a 40% weight on the overall score. Therefore, Times-QS is somehow designated as having academic prestige. On the other hand, ARWU is based on internationally comparable third-party data and no subjective measures are used. (Liu & Cheng, 2007, p.5)

The next aspect of ranking is the number of evaluated HEIs. Only about 1,200 HEI from more than 17,000 HEI worldwide have been ranked in ARWU and only 500 of them are published. (Liu & Cheng, 2007, p.5; Hazelkorn, 2007, p.4) CHE University ranking includes information from more than 280 universities and universities of applied science of Germany meaning that many more universities are ranked in proportion.

The Times-QS and ARWU do not take into account size of institutions, therefore bigger universities have the advantage because they are better placed. ARWU explains this specific feature with strict usage of comparable third-party data to escape from subjectivity of data.

The creators of ARWU stated that different stakeholders have different expectations about quality and that it would be impossible to rank quality worldwide because of the differences between HEI and the technical difficulties of obtaining internationally comparable data. (Liu & Cheng, 2005, p.134; Hazelkorn, 2007b) To escape this restriction, CHE University ranking has a large number of criteria and the results are grouped in several ways and consumers also have the opportunity to create their own rankings based on selected criteria.

The authors propose a hypothesis stating that ranking does not show quality. The authors of the Times-QS ranking point out that this rating is a comparison of educational institutions according to certain criteria but it never mentions quality. ARWU does not mention quality but it analyses the academic or research performance of the university based on internationally comparable third-party data. On the other hand, quality means meeting customer satisfaction (Garvin, 1984). And if the 'customer' is interested, for example, in ARWU used criteria, then one can say that ARWU represents quality for this 'customer'. Therefore relevance of rankings with higher education quality is based on customer expectations and the criteria used for the preparation of ranking.

Quality is related to improvement. If rankings are related to quality, they support quality improvement. However, results that higher education institutions cannot improve are, for example, 'peer-reviews' and Nobel Prize laureates, but mostly HEIs can work on results that can be improved, for example, citation, number of international students, expenses for science, library etc. Many criteria give opportunities for HEIs to improve ranking results.

The work of a high quality university is defined as a process (how the knowledge is obtained) as well as a product (the content of study programmes, graduates with a certain level of knowledge and skills). Garvin mentions a

number of quality definitions in which quality is related to the comparison of the products' characteristics and whether they meet or exceed customer expectations. (Garvin, 1984)

Ranking indicators are proxies for quality, for example, citations and publication show the academic quality, employment shows the quality of graduates etc. (Hazelkorn, 2007b)

### ***Accreditation as a method for quality evaluation***

Accreditation is one of existing approaches of study programme quality evaluation in the European higher education area (EHEA). Although the main purpose of accreditation is the assessment of the study programmes' compliance with government regulations, accreditation also involves the evaluation of study programmes according to the established criteria. However, in Latvia, accreditation usually means only passing/failing certain thresholds of a set of parameters thus giving little data for comparing and ranking.

In Latvia it is stated that each higher education institution as well as each study programme has to obtain accreditation. At the end of the accreditation process a university/study programme will be accredited for two or six years. Accreditation is based on the institutions' self-analysis document, which evaluates study facilities, resources used in the study programmes, analysis of academic staff as well as student, graduate and employer questionnaires. A self-analysis document is supplemented by the visit of experts and their conclusions. The commission makes a decision about the accreditation of institution/study programme according to all this data. The Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC) organises the accreditation activities.

Although the experts evaluate the study programme according to precise criteria during the accreditation process and record the results into a form created by HEQEC it is hard to tell whether results can be interpreted equally.

The first reason is the value scale in the questionnaire. Experts are asked to respond to each question with values ranging from 4 (excellent), 3 (highly satisfactory), 2 (satisfactory) to 1 (unsatisfactory). At the same time, there are no criteria with which to value cases. As a matter of fact such an evaluation scale is only sufficient to evaluate the study programmes' correspondence to the requirements; however the results obtained are too general. The second reason is the diversity of the study programmes. There should be additional criteria of evaluation for different study programmes. This is not possible in the case with a one-fits-all questionnaire. The questionnaires show that experts often give additional evaluation in the free comments section. (HEQEC, 2008)

There is a belief that accreditation does not fulfil its aim as there are very few higher education institutions which do not receive accreditation. This process needs certain improvements.

### ***Solutions for study programme quality evaluation***

Based on previously reviewed information, the authors conclude that accreditation is more or less appropriate for evaluating study quality. However, it is necessary to take into consideration existing weaknesses and to supplement the set of accreditation questions corresponding to each evaluated study programme. It is also necessary to define precise and unambiguous evaluation criteria.

The authors have developed a questionnaire for evaluating ICT study programmes (Dosbergs, 2008), which is based on the study programme accreditation form (HEQEC, 2007) and has supplemented these questions with specific criteria for evaluating ICT programmes (criteria obtained from expert focus groups) (HEQEC, 2008). The authors have also included criteria described in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and criteria used in CHE University Ranking. The questionnaire includes 49 quality criteria from the following groups:

- aims and objectives of the study programme
- study programme content
- regular activities for quality assurance
- competence of the academic staff
- available resources
- teaching quality
- graduates
- technical environment
- student assessment

- cooperation with employers and other HEI.

The authors have chosen the focus group method to identify and validate the study quality criteria. A group of experts including ICT study programme directors, ICT study programme evaluating experts as well as members of HEQEC was created.

The identification and validation of study programme quality criteria as well as the development of general study programme quality evaluation methods take place in three stages.

- During the first stage the focus group experts evaluate the quality criteria proposed by the authors. It is expected that besides these criteria the experts will provide more criteria for evaluating study programmes and, indeed, some of the criteria could be removed.
- During the second stage the answers of the experts are reviewed and the criteria are approved. This stage also includes the next focus group considering the evaluation of each criterion.
- During the third stage the experts evaluate the quality of a study programme based on the evaluation of each criterion.

The following methods of study programme quality evaluation will be used:

1. The experts identify a set of quality criteria QC, that is composed of quality criteria  $\{qc_1, qc_2, \dots, qc_n\}$ . The quality of the study programme will be evaluated according to these quality criteria.
2. A set of potential values  $U_i$  is fixed for each quality criteria  $qc_i$ . This set includes all the possible values of criteria  $qc_i$ , for example, quality criterion 'Graduate employability' can be evaluated by values from 0% to 100%.
3. The experts divide the set of potential values  $U_i$  of each quality criteria  $qc_i$  into one or more classes  $\{u_{i1}, u_{i2}, \dots, u_{ij}\}$ , for example, values from 0% to 100% can be divided into five classes:
  - $u_{i1} = [100\% - 90\%]$ ;
  - $u_{i2} = [90\% - 80\%]$ ;
  - $u_{i3} = [80\% - 70\%]$ ;
  - $u_{i4} = [60\% - 50\%]$ ;
  - $u_{i5} = [50\% - 0\%]$
4. The experts establish study programme quality grades  $\{1.\text{grade}, 2.\text{grade}, \dots, n.\text{grade}\}$  of study programme quality assessment and adjust appropriate quality criteria  $qc_i$  value classes to each grade.
5. Each quality criterion  $qc_i$  is assessed to calculate study programme quality and the value from the set of potential values  $U_i$  is selected. The conformity to quality criteria class  $u_{ij}$  is estimated for each quality criterion  $qc_i$  according to the acquired value. The quality of the whole study programme which is the conformity to one of the grades defined by the experts can be evaluated according to the grade definition created by the experts.

### Conclusion

The aim of this research was to identify methodology and criteria groups of ICT study programme quality evaluation. The criteria mentioned in this article were sent to experts for detailed analysis and approval.

The authors of this article considered the criteria of ICT study programmes, but these criteria can also be used for quality assessment of other study programmes. A general and similarly interpretable study programme evaluation can be created as a result of this example.

The authors plan to develop a supporting tool of study programme quality evaluation and collected data storage during future research activities. This tool would not only support the accreditation that is performed once in two or six years, but also annual quality assessment activities. The tool will be offered to the Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre, so the experts involved in accreditation can store the evaluated and approved data to summarise it into a ranking and make it accessible to the public. Data stored over a long period of time would help to analyse and compare the quality of different study programmes and assist in quality improvements.

The authors assume that this is a view on quality from the experts' perspective and the number of used criteria in future researches can be enlarged by involving other consumers in the evaluation.

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## 4. STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT

### **Training of students as experts for external quality assurance – the Swiss experience**

*Christian Schneijderberg<sup>1</sup> and Monika Risse Kuhn<sup>2</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

To advance on a new project in quality assurance needs a lot of communication and a common understanding of the different stakeholders involved. The description of the Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ) and VSS-UNES-USU the National Union of Students of Switzerland, including the process of discussion and decision-making, will constitute the first part of this text. This introduces the main issue: the discussion of the role of students in quality assurance and training them for acting as full members of an expert panel in quality assessments.

#### **The partners**

##### **Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ)**

The mission of the OAQ is to assure and promote the quality of teaching and research at Swiss universities. It operates independently, and bases its work on international practices and research findings. It organises and manages its own affairs under the terms of its by-laws and has its own budget. The OAQ began its work in October 2001. Under the terms of the Federal Law on Financial Aid to Universities, the OAQ, on behalf of the Swiss University Conference and for the State Secretariat for Education and Research, carries out various quality assessments (accreditation of institutions and programmes, evaluation procedures, institutional audits) according to international good practices. Since 2008, it has also carried out accreditation procedures on behalf of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs (Universities of applied sciences).

The OAQ considers the participation of students on all levels of the accreditation process as a very important issue. Until 2007 the situation concerning the participation of students in external quality assessments of the OAQ was as follows: In 2003 the guidelines for academic accreditation in Switzerland were introduced. These "old guidelines" did not explicitly contain specific regulations for student participation in the expert panels of accreditation procedures. Students and alumni have always been among the parties interviewed by the expert panel during the site-visits. Student representatives also always took an active part in the self-evaluation phase but they did not act as experts of learning during the Swiss accreditation procedures. Only the revised guidelines for academic accreditation in Switzerland, which came into force in June 2007, gave the OAQ the legal basis allowing students to be members of expert panels (institutional and program accreditation). They are treated within the expert panels with equal status with the same rights and tasks as the other panel members.

##### **The National Union of Students of Switzerland (VSS-UNES-USU<sup>3</sup>)**

VSS-UNES-USU was founded in 1920. As the national body of the local student unions, it is mainly concerned with issues of national and international higher education. This includes the European Students' Union (ESU). The standing orders identify VSS-UNES-USU as a democratic association independent from any political organisation and party.

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<sup>2</sup> Scientific collaborator of Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities.

<sup>3</sup> VSS-UNES-USU is the abbreviation for the Name of the national union of students in three of the four official languages of Switzerland. German: VSS = Verband der Schweizer Studierendenschaften; Franch: UNES = Union des Etudiant-e-s de Suisse; and Italian: USU = Unione Svizzera degli Universitari; The Retoroman name Uniun svizra da studentas e students did not get is abbreviation, but exists as well.



VSS-UNES-USU started discussions about a possible involvement in quality assurance with critical distance to the subject and with reflections about its opportunities and threats. The difficult situation of student involvement on the different quality assurance levels was a key issue. On the other hand two political issues were discussed: the danger of being part of a system of public accountability connected to the undemocratic new public management approach. Secondly the challenges of using quality assurance and accreditation procedures as an asset to enhance the quality of studies and institutions; and not contributing to any kind of standardisation of either study programmes or institutions.

In November 2006, the assembly of delegates voted for VSS-UNES-USU to take an active position in the process of establishing the quality assurance and accreditation system. The following lines of action were agreed on:

- become a full partner on all quality assurance levels: within the higher education institution, in the bodies and discussions on the national level and in cooperation with the accreditation agency
- sign an agreement of cooperation with the OAQ
- set-up the student accreditation pool
- project-evaluation after a relevant number of students have been part of expert panels.

To get a thorough understanding of the challenges met and development made in involving students in quality assurance it is necessary to explore the situation of student participation in Switzerland.

#### *The role of students*

Traditionally, the role of students in the Swiss higher education system was vague. There is only a weak “tradition of student participation”. The position of students as partners in higher education or customers of higher education is a matter for debate together with the discussion about the contribution students can make or are not supposed to make within higher education institutions and the system as a whole. Also, the support and inclusion by the governing bodies of higher education institutions cannot be described as “full partnership” - as written in the Bologna documents signed by the ministers. A quote from the European University Association (EUA) evaluation of the Bologna Unit of the Swiss Rectors Conference (CRUS) gives an impression of the complex situation:

Assuming this sample of students to be representative of the high general quality of the student body, it is even more difficult from an external point of view to understand why more has not been done to include students systematically in discussion and implementation of reform. [...] The relative absence of students as partners is a major weakness of implementation so far, and is holding back more successful initiative. Reforms should be designed to benefit students, and it is therefore logical that students should be encouraged to play a role as partners. (CRUS, 2008, pp. 7-8)

This is almost the only weak point mentioned by the EUA team in an otherwise extremely positive report on the work done by the Swiss Bologna Unit.

#### **External quality assurance**

The starting point of student participation in external quality assurance can be set in autumn 2006 and is well illustrated in the ESU publication *Bologna with Student Eyes* (2007, p. 18). The map “student participation in QA” shows Switzerland as a country coloured in red, with red meaning “no student involvement at all” in Bologna-Europe. In autumn 2006 VSS-UNES-USU and the OAQ signed a bilateral agreement and started cooperating on the issue. But it was only after the revision of the guidelines for accreditation was it possible to integrate students in expert panels (Accreditation Guidelines Art. 20). Discussions were undertaken with the people in charge of higher education on the national political level, the institutional partners like the Swiss University Conference, uniting the cantonal heads of the departments of education, Rectors conference and the Network on quality assurance with the responsible persons for quality assurance at the universities.

It was extremely helpful that the demand for more integration of students in external quality assurance came from outside, mainly the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

VSS-UNES-USU started to set up the student pool of accreditation in cooperation with OAQ. The “Studentischer Akkreditierungspool” was presented to the higher education stakeholders during a well attended conference on the “Role of Students in Internal and External Quality Assurance” on 5th October 2007 in Bern. After the conference a big step forward was noticed on all levels. Although on internal quality assurance further work needs to be done. In a possible future publication of *Bologna with Student Eyes* Switzerland can be coloured an attractive orange with light green stripes, meaning students are involved on only one to two levels.

### **Students as experts in theory**

The literature on how to qualify as an expert of anything is vast. Views on student involvement in the processes of quality assurance agencies discussions have been published already (e.g. ENQA, 2004). Nevertheless the “added value” (Froestad/Bakken, 2004, p. 38) of student participation in quality assurance has to be clarified. In the document published by the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education the «added value» is presented as follows, with the addition of the statements being rather independent from the focus of the network on external accreditation procedures:

Student participation helps to promote that the student’s view on quality will be focused on in the panels’ work. [...] Student participation adds legitimacy to the conclusions of the panel for the students at the evaluated institutions. (Froestad/Bakken, 2004, p. 38)

The findings of “added value” are interesting to compare with the particular situation in Switzerland and the statement the EUA team made with regard to the lack of student involvement:

Not only have choices sometimes been made that have created new obstacles and problems for students, but there also has been a general lack of partnership with students. (CRUS, 2008, p. 7)

As it reads on, the EUA team indicates two “kinds” of students, referring to “ordinary” students and therefore “not ordinary” student representatives, which is a little interesting but helpful for clarification. It qualifies a plus in expertise and knowledge about higher education that student representatives have on top of “such a display of intelligence, critical thinking, rational analysis and pragmatic problem-solving” (CRUS, 2008, p. 7) described by the EUA team. This can be read as a strong support for more student participation and students as full partners in higher education in Switzerland.

### **The student pool of accreditation**

VSS-UNES-USU and OAQ had extensive discussions on how to train the students and what competences are considered necessary for becoming a member of the pool to meet the challenges already set? One issue was the introduction in the complex Swiss higher education system<sup>4</sup>. But most difficult to meet was and still is the understanding of how groups of individuals from different backgrounds and position cooperate within sensitive conditions.

Taking this into consideration VSS-UNES-USU formulated and published a profile. Applicants to the pool need a letter of motivation, a fact sheet and the signed agreement with the pool and the candidates have to provide a CV. To become an active member of the pool, participation in a training session is mandatory. To fit all training activities into a one-day session, the candidates are requested to do some advance preparation. The students receive a certificate of participation. Once a year, a workshop is organised to expand the students’ knowledge on the topic and space is given for further discussions. Selected students agree to hand over one fifth of their expert honorarium into the pool. With this money, all activities of the pool are financed. Finally, the pool needs to be advertised. Due to the short time of studies in the Bologna system there is a frequent need of recruitment of new students. Most marketing is done via the network of student unions and associations on the level of departments. But also partners like the Rectors conference of the universities of applied sciences have been involved.

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<sup>4</sup> See State Secretariat for Education and Research SER: Switzerland’s education system, [http://www.sbf.admin.ch/htm/themen/bildung\\_en.html](http://www.sbf.admin.ch/htm/themen/bildung_en.html)

## *The training of student experts*

### **Conceptualisation of training**

The OAQ and VSS-UNES-USU prepared a concept for the training of the student experts. It contained several sections, which defined the learning outcomes of the training, the method and didactics as well as the documentation and the evaluation of the training workshop.

In this first round of training the target audience were the students and it was planned as a workshop.

The outcomes were defined as follows:

- the students are prepared to participate in a qualified way in the expert panels of external quality assurance procedures
- the students are equal partners on the expert panel
- the students are experts of the Swiss Higher Education System
- the students know the mission and goals of accreditation and quality assurance
- the students know how an external quality assurance procedure works.

The following sessions were planned:

- introduction: the Swiss higher education system and external quality assurance (with input from a QA representative of a HEI)
- the role of experts: European Standards and role of student experts
- workshops: The study and analysis of self-evaluation reports, including case study and On-site-visit and writing of expert reports, including case study
- discussion.

The workshop sessions were led by VSS-UNES-USU and a scientific collaborator of OAQ.

The following didactics / methods were used:

- input speeches
- role playing
- analysis of case studies
- narrated experiences from experts
- analysis of reports (self-evaluation report; expert report)
- composition of expert report
- testing of learning outcomes.

Also a list of documents was prepared that the students had to study in preparation of the workshop.

### **Implementation and evaluation of training**

In October 2007, the VSS-UNES-USU organised, together with the OAQ, the first training workshop for future student experts. 29 students from universities and universities of applied sciences attended the workshop. A further training was also given by VSS-UNES-USU and OAQ in February 2008 in order to prepare students for their expert role in institutional audits. The second basic training day of the pool was held in May 2008. At the end of each workshop the participants filled in a questionnaire the results of which are to be used for improvement of the training. Feedback was given to the participants by e-mail.

Looking at the evaluations of the first two trainings, participants felt that the workshops were held in a very good and familiar atmosphere, they appreciated the knowledge of the experts that were present and the methods/ didactics of the workshop. Also, very good validation was given to the reports of practical experiences and to the composition of the workshop content. The use of English as training language was criticised. Another problem was the preparation of the students prior to the workshop and which essential documents they were expected read in advance.

To put it in a nutshell: The conceptualisation and the implementation of the training for student experts was, on one hand, a quite complex task due to several national specificities like the composition of the tertiary education level as well as the diversity in languages but, on the other hand, due to a very good cooperation of OAQ and VSS-UNES-USU also a very fruitful experience.

### *Students as experts: lessons learned from the first experiences*

The starting point of having students as experts in external quality assurance assessments was the institutional audits at all Swiss public universities in spring 2008. These audits are mandatory assessments of the internal quality assurance systems of the universities. They are required by the State Secretariat for Education and Research and organised and carried out by the OAQ every 4 years to examine if the legal prerequisites of the federal financial support are still fulfilled.

The following feedback was gathered at a meeting of OAQ and the student experts in the middle of September 2008. A main discussion point also was the role of students as experts. The feedback was divided into four main areas of discussion: preparation, integration, engagement, role of student expert. Open remarks were possible as well.

The questions were also given to the scientific collaborators of OAQ in charge of these procedures. Generally they said that the students were well prepared for their task and most of them very well integrated into the expert panel. Regarding the areas evaluated, students sometimes focussed a bit too strongly on subjects closer to them and on gender issues. Sometimes they were encouraged to do otherwise; at times it was due to the distribution of tasks in the expert group. Generally the inclusion of the students' view was considered as an asset. Another issue to be included more strongly into further trainings for the students is the introduction of an even more in-depth knowledge of the national setting. With the students being sometimes the only natives in an international group of experts they can be expected to take a more active role within the group. Before and after the site visit, the students contributed well to the final report as much as any of the experts.

The students reported the experience of being part of such a team and procedure as very valuable. All of them felt well integrated into the team, got time during the interviews to ask questions and felt comfortable during the discussions in the group. Incidents of patronising were few. All of them had a good idea of their role when doing their task as student experts. In their opinion most of them were "full experts" and not only "experts of learning" or only able to bring in the student perspective.

The only complaints were that some experts and peer-leaders underestimated the competences and knowledge of the students. Looking at the preparation of the three-day site visits the students took up to one week of preparation reading the extensive self-evaluation reports including up to 2000 pages of annexes online. This was strongly criticised by the students. Another difficulty was the language. One audit was in Italian, one in English, two in French, three in German and one in French and German. The use of terms varied in the languages and caused misunderstandings. As a final point it was mentioned that sometimes the deadlines for commenting on the expert report was a bit too short.

The speed of the interviews was a challenge for the students. There are always a lot of questions left to ask when the interview is already finished. So they need to know the self-evaluation well, make choices, to prepare the necessary questions, and follow the evolving discussion with multiple tracks that the students have to be aware of. For all of them it only took a short time to adopt well to the speed of the interviews.

All this feedback gives further input for the planning of the training sessions. It was recommended to concentrate more on working with self-evaluation reports and give less input during the trainings. Due to the relative absence of published self-evaluation reports there is a need to create fictional samples of varying quality. This would enable the students to judge more easily what kind of report to expect and would help avoid the potential problem of weak self-evaluation reports. They would also get to know better how to work with the standards, read between the lines, single out the overarching principles and focus on certain hot issues. This demands a lot of preparation for the students. It carries the need to provide the information on the standards and supplementary readings. All this is available on the Website of VSS-UNES-USU.

The valuable insight is being processed at the moment. VSS-UNES-USU and OAQ are working on the improvement and standardisation of the training methods and content. With this we are positive we can establish the participation of students in external quality assurance as a well-accepted and desired reality and to have student experts that function like the other experts.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

### Two complex issues: rankings and learning outcomes

*Mantz Yorke<sup>1</sup>*

Discussion groups at the Forum tackled two issues which, as their reports demonstrated, have a multiplicity of angles to them – rankings of institutions and the use of learning outcomes in curricular specifications. The group reports make a significant contribution to the reflections that follow.

#### **Rankings (or 'league tables')**

Rankings of institutions (and of disciplines by institution) have become part of the landscape of higher education. Like them or not, they are here to stay since they can have considerable impact on the incomes of the publishers, and in difficult economic times their commercial value gains further in attractiveness. The challenge for higher education is how to respond. The first kind of response is to criticise the rankings on various grounds; the second is to find ways of working with them.

#### **Some criticisms**

Lee Harvey is uncompromising in his criticism: rankings are theoretically bankrupt and methodologically suspect. More attention has been given to the latter than to the former. It is easy to demonstrate – for example, as has been done by Yorke & Longden (2005) and CHERI & Hobsons Research (2008) for rankings of institutions in the UK – that many of the 'measures' in use are highly correlated, and that overall scores cumulate a mixture of input, process and output variables. Variables that are important to the choices being made by intending students (such as the quality of teaching, which itself is a portmanteau of aspects) are awkward to measure and hence are difficult to accommodate. Unless the rankings are differentiated by subject area (and preferably by programme) it is difficult for intending students to make even minimally-informed judgements as to whether the provision in an institution aligns with their particular needs.

There is in rankings of institutions often an implicit theory in which the ideal is typified by the provision in elite institutions. Yet institutions – especially in massified systems – exhibit diversity of mission. Rankings tend to be unsympathetic to diversity in institutional mission. Put another way, rankings reflect the preferences of the compilers – and, since the rankings must have credibility with the public, they cannot diverge significantly from the established 'pecking order' of institutions. One publisher, when asked if it would publish a general table giving a 'top-ten' place to an institution focusing on the widening of participation and vocational programmes, simply said 'no'.

Excellence in an elite, research-led institution may need to be construed rather differently from excellence in a neighbourhood-focused institution which concentrates on ensuring access across the area's demographic spectrum. Despite their inherent technical weaknesses, the rankings produced by *US News and World Report* are subdivided by broad institutional type, acknowledging some diversity of institutional mission.

Some smaller institutions may not be included in the rankings. For example, specialist institutions catering for the arts may be very prestigious but, because they do not fit the way in which the rankings are constructed, are omitted. They have to achieve their visibility in other ways: for the most prominent, absence from the rankings may in practice be of little consequence.

#### **Working with rankings**

Institutions, understandably, have an eye to their position in the rankings, and some 'behave to the test' by finding ways in which the data used in the rankings can be presented in the best interests of the institution. For example, the way an institution presents its spending on resources can make a difference: one institution realised that recording expenditure on computers within department-level accounts meant that it was not counted at the

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institutional level, and hence rejigged the way in which the expenditure was recorded – apparently to good effect. It is not unreasonable for an institution, when managing the data that it submits to interested parties, to have an eye to the way in which the data may be used. However, there is a fine line to be drawn between ‘playing the rankings game’ according to the (tacit) rules and subverting ‘the game’ by the deliberate manipulation of data.

The potential utility of rankings in marketing is valued by managers – if they can find an angle in the rankings that they can exploit. After all, a claim to be something like ‘the top university in the north-east for learning resources’ can always be trumpeted, however tenuous might be the connection with the totality of the students’ learning experiences.

More may be made of small differences in overall score than can be justified, even if the methodological problems are put to one side. One institution, for example, commended itself internally because of a rise from 77th to 72nd in one of the UK rankings, despite a difference in overall score that would be engulfed by the error of measurement (setting aside the rankings’ technical inadequacies).

### **Institutional hypocrisy?**

Rankings tempt institutions towards hypocrisy. Whilst institutional analysts criticise rankings for their methodological shortcomings, the marketing departments may be only too happy to call upon them as evidence of institutional quality. Higher education is supposed to have a particular respect for the integrity of evidence, and is always keen to criticise inflated claims from research and practice in other domains. Since rankings are so dubious, it would surely be ethically proper for institutions collectively to agree not to refer to them in promotional and other materials. With the world as it is, such an agreement may take some time to secure.

### *Learning outcomes*

In her address to the Forum, Dorte Kristofferson remarked that outcomes-led education was a challenge for quality assurance. The discussions in the groups showed how right she was.

The use of learning outcomes makes it crystal clear that the focus is on students’ learning rather than teachers’ teaching. This is not new, since the promotion of behavioural objectives in the second half of the twentieth century had made much the same point, though the use of terms such as ‘instructional objectives’ tended to distract attention from the key intention to concentrate on students’ learning. When students’ learning is made the centre of pedagogic attention, situations in which the students are relatively passive are implicitly criticised: lectures, for example, have their place but should not be an unquestioned pedagogical method since research has shown that many higher order learning outcomes are not best served by them. Learning outcomes can be a challenge to a pedagogic mindset, but could be treated as mere verbal formulations that mask the maintenance of existing inappropriate pedagogic practices. Declarations of change should not be confused with change itself, as observers of political behaviour are well aware.

Learning outcomes pose a challenge to learning experiences where the intended achievements cannot be specified in other than general terms – cases in point include the exercise of creativity and some aspects of postgraduate learning. The critical dimensions here are the nature of the problem or task and the nature of the expected solution: each can be seen as closed or open (Table 1).

<b>Type of learning outcome</b>	<b>Problem or task</b>	<b>Response</b>
‘Instructional’	Closed	Closed
Problem-solving	Closed	Open
Creative	Open	Open
Social	Open	Open

*Table 1. Learning outcomes and the nature of problems and solutions*

In some instances (which can be subsumed under the heading of ‘instructional outcomes’), the task facing the student is closed and the required response is pre-ordained. Some problems may be specified quite tightly, but the

solving is left open to the students' imagination and capabilities (if the problem has a designated correct response, then the task is puzzle-solving rather than problem-solving). When creative endeavour is involved, students may be required to set their own problems and work on the solutions to them, as is epitomised in (but is not limited to) the field of art and design. Lastly, with 'employability' appearing on the agenda of higher education systems across the world, social outcomes have gained in prominence. Work-related and work-based learning experiences require students to be 'effective operators' in their situations – for example, by exhibiting aspects of performance such as team-working and the capacity to present a case convincingly to others. As is the case for learning outcomes associated with creativity, in advance of the actual experience the expectations can be stated in only general terms. Success can only be evaluated during and after the event. Assessors recognise success when they see it, but have to be able to justify the assessments that they make.

Learning outcomes pose a number of challenges for assessment practice, of which 'open' solutions to assigned tasks are of one type. Other challenges include determining the optimal level of statement of learning outcomes; the comparability of outcomes across both disciplinary areas and institutions; and the implications for overall assessment outcomes such as grade-point averages and honours degree classifications.

### **Optimality**

For each assigned task, there is an optimal level of specificity with which the outcomes are expressed. Broadly, if the learning outcomes are specified too tightly, they may be too finely granular to be of practical utility: early use of learning outcomes in modular schemes in the UK often employed too many stated outcomes to be practically useful. Conversely, if the learning outcomes are expressed at a high level of generality, they may be too coarsely-grained to be of value to an assessor (and to the students, of course). The trick, for the curriculum designer, is to find the level of precision in stating learning outcomes that is optimally appropriate to the expectations. As Goldilocks found, in the fairy tale *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, the ideal bed is not too hard and not too soft, but just right.

### **Comparability**

A major challenge to comparability is the opacity of the language used to specify learning outcomes. The same words can mean quite different achievements in different subjects: as the playwright George Bernard Shaw is alleged to have said of England and America, subject disciplines are divided by a common language. 'Analysis' and 'creativity' carry different performative implications in, for example, history, engineering and fine art. Further, institutions differ in what they expect of students under such taxonomic terms. It is not until learning outcomes are unpacked through exemplifications that the intentions behind the words can be properly understood.

Academic expectations are influenced by disciplinary norms that apply across institutions. In the UK, one manifestation of these norms is the collection of 'subject benchmarks' that were prepared under the aegis of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], largely for first-degree programmes. The grading of students' work is influenced by disciplinary traditions. Analysis of honours degree classifications in the UK shows that the distributions of awards vary quite markedly between disciplines. Science-based disciplines in the UK tend to have relatively flat distributions with substantial numbers of first- and third-class awards, whereas humanities disciplines are characterised by fewer first- and third-class awards but proportionately more upper and lower second-class awards. It is noticeably less likely that a student will obtain first-class honours in law and in business studies, and so on. Similar kinds of difference can be found in data from the US.

Variation within subject disciplines is likely to be less of a problem than variation across subject disciplines. However, comparisons in both respects may provide useful information for quality assurance. If an institution's award profile in a subject discipline is out of line with those in appropriate comparators, it could stimulate an inquiry as to why this might be so. It is likely that any institution's award profiles will vary according to the subject discipline. In the UK, external examiners from time to time suggest to institutions that grading should make use of the full scale that is available (more often than not, this is the percentage scale), since disciplines in the humanities, social sciences and arts tend to use percentage grades in the range 30 to 80 rather than 0 to 100. Again, there is an underlying issue of meaning in the grades. A performance meriting, say, 70 per cent in sociology may not be inferior to one meriting 85 per cent in chemistry – the difference may reside in the way in which grading takes place in the two

disciplines. Where comparisons are being made within a subject discipline, it may not matter too much that another discipline adopts a different approach to grading. However, once disciplinary boundaries are crossed, differences become more problematic, as is readily apparent when combining grades from modules from different disciplines to produce an overall grading, and when an employer seeking to recruit a graduate is weighing up the relative merits of equivalently-graded performances from different disciplines.

### Implications for overall assessments

The use of learning outcomes presses the pedagogical model towards that of 'mastery learning' in which it is theoretically possible for every student undertaking the work to attain a high level of success – perfection, even. In practice, this rarely happens, and what is observed is a shift in the distribution of grades from an approximately normal curve to one in which the grades tend to cluster at the upper end. The difference, which is that between norm-referenced assessment and criterion-referenced assessment, is schematically illustrated in Figure 1.

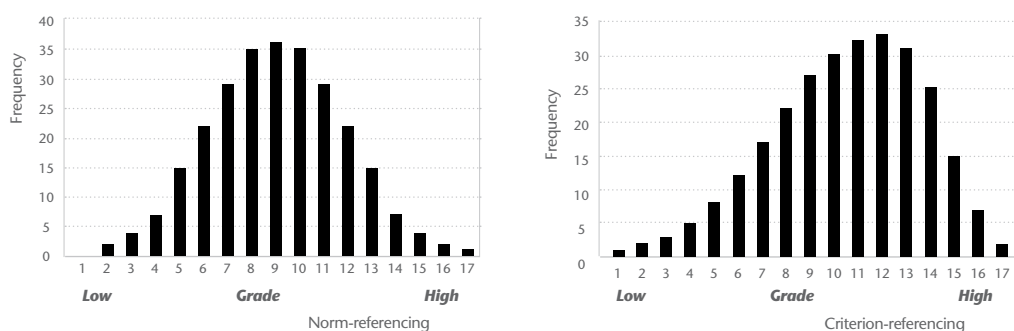


Figure 1. A schematic comparison of grade distributions likely under norm- and criterion-referenced assessment.

Norm-referencing pits every student against his or her peers. Only a modest proportion can gain a high grade, and most performances are graded close to the mean (which is, of course, determined from the performances of the cohort). Criterion-referencing, on the other hand, pits every student against the prescribed learning outcomes, and hence distributions of grades do not necessarily approximate 'normality' – indeed they can be quite markedly skewed.

For quality assurance, there is a significant implication. The world outside higher education and some academics within the sector seem to work on an assumption that student achievement is (or should be) graded roughly according to the normal curve. Criterion-referenced assessment can, as Figure 1 demonstrates, result in performances that are graded towards the upper end of the scale. Overall outcomes under criterion-referenced assessment, therefore, are likely to rise as a consequence, though the rise may primarily be due to a fundamental change in the method of grading. When examining profiles of student achievement, therefore, those responsible for quality assurance need to enquire into, and appreciate the implications of, the basis on which students' work is being assessed. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System [ECTS] is based on normative assumptions, with the percentages of students appearing in each of its five passing bands expected to be roughly normally distributed, as follows: 10 per cent awarded grade A; 25 B; 30 C; 25 D; and 10 E. The University of Helsinki, to give one example, rejects the normative distribution of ECTS and asserts that 'there is no rule or expectation as to how big a proportion of the participants in any given course can be given what grade; each student is graded on his/her individual performance, not in relation to the performance of others' (see [www.helsinki.fi/exchange/studies/index.html#CreditsandGrading](http://www.helsinki.fi/exchange/studies/index.html#CreditsandGrading), accessed 26 December 2008).

An advantage of using learning outcomes is that they make transparent what the students are expected to achieve as a consequence of their engagement in higher education. They could even be construed as a contribution to the



implicit contract between an institution and its students. The danger is that they may be taken to define all that students are expected to achieve through their engagement in higher education. Students could, as the poet T S Eliot wrote in *The Dry Salvages*, have 'had the experience but missed the meaning' – not what is generally intended as regards the broader aims of higher education.

***Where next?***

The discussions at the Forum indicated that both rankings and learning outcomes are 'live issues' in higher education. Of the two, the latter has more implications for quality assurance. Yet there is more to be learned about the complex relationship between learning outcomes and quality assurance. A systematic appraisal of this relationship seems urgently to be needed.

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