Strange yet compatible bedfellows: Quality assurance and quality improvement

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The 1990s have seen the emergence of "quality" as a significant issue in higher education policy and institutional practice. The recognition of the importance of higher education within universities has varied according to their histories, institutional structures and leadership styles. However, two distinct categories of quality assurance have emerged: (1) the "quality of learning" and (2) the "quality of teaching." These two categories have been identified in the framework of the conservative restoration theory in order to give a broader perspective to the use of market forces to induce quality improvements. (p. 127)

While this is acknowledged, it will no longer be feasible to sustain the view that the level of government policy is important to the steady promotion of quality within some countries, particularly Australia. The view that universities are independent, for-profit enterprises is reinforced by the concept of the "quality of teaching." This concept has its origins in the idea that higher education is a service that must be provided to society. The quality of teaching is seen as a way of ensuring that higher education is effective, efficient, and relevant to the needs of society. (p. 128)

Quality in policy discourse

Higher education policies have emerged within an economic context in which higher education is being made more attractive to students, and at the same time not increasing financial input. In other words, universities are being asked to do more with less. As Yetman (1993) observes, what we have seen is the replacement of public policy objectives in terms of social goods by public policy objectives in terms of public goods. (p. 129)

Underlying the notion of "quality" is the concept of quality improvement and the notion of public policy. This notion is based on the premise that higher education is a public good that should be provided to society. The quality of teaching is seen as a way of ensuring that higher education is effective, efficient, and relevant to the needs of society. (p. 129)

Messages within the policy documents

The problem of defining quality

As a general level it can be said that there are mixed messages within the policy documents themselves. On the one hand, the documents are a vehicle of communication for policymakers and for the individuals and organizations with whom they are written. On the other hand, they are a document that provides a framework for the policies that are developed and implemented. It is in this context that the problem of defining quality arises. (p. 130)

Institutional autonomy

A dominant message within all of the policy documents is that institutions are autonomous and that they have the right to develop their own quality initiatives. Baldwin's position (1991, p. 31) for example is:

"It is for institutions to determine their mission, to define what they mean by quality, and then determine what they mean by their own objectives, and to identify and provide the evidence necessary to show that they are achieving those objectives." (p. 130)

Despite these claims, the notion of institutional autonomy is not a strong theme in the policy documents. In fact, the emphasis is on the need for institutions to define their own objectives and to develop their own quality initiatives. (p. 131)

The results will be to impose an adversarial management cost- accountability model on institutions. This could lead to a reduction in quality, a decrease in the effectiveness of institutions, and a decrease in the ability of institutions to meet the needs of society. (p. 131)
Quality assurance and quality improvement

Two competing models of quality

Quality assurance

The institutional QM model evident within much federal government policy discourse is technocratic in its orientation and application. In its more severe form this approach is concerned with increasing compliance with externally driven standards. The tension arising within universities now is between the demands for external accountability and improving the quality of internal processes.

Within a QM framework quality is treated as a synonym for "performance". Its advocates require the imposition of technical instrumentation as performance indicators to measure input and output of educational spending and resources. This instrumental view of quality validates the use of quantitative measures such as the number of students, postgraduate students, research income and so as indicators of performance. Accordingly, it is taken as the measure of quality, rather than the effectiveness of the external world, both as to the purpose of higher education and as to the means by which quality ought to be assessed and improved (Burset, 1992). It could be said that the recently initiated Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CAHRE) may well use such measures in its deliberations regarding the allocation of research funds. This view is seen to be attractive by some because quite simply, as Lindsay (1992) argues, inputs are much easier to measure and monitor.

Several issues emerge as being of concern as a result of the preference exhibited by bureaucrats for the QM model. First, the autonomy of the academy comes into question as the instrumentalist approaches make it all too easy for political interference and manipulation at all levels. Second, universities that once prized themselves on their independence and their ability to provide an external voice of critique find themselves silenced by the possibility of punishment for non-activity. Third, the Australian university system that has credited itself in its diversity may well find itself under greater centralised control, not only in terms of resource allocation and programme priorities but also in terms of more stringent forms of externally mandated accountability. The current situation is such that the university is politically na"ive. Universities do not develop quality management plans and initiatives. This is regardless of the fact that quality still remains a diffuse concept despite the burgeoning number of training workshops and the proliferation of academic writings on its ontology and practice. Lindsay's (1992, p. 16) observation is pertinent. "While paying more attention on important core issues in higher education, the "quality debate" regrettably has not generated a conceptually sophisticated and innovative attack on the elusive notion of "quality in education". The support for QM serves the interests of external stakeholders, in particular the federal government bureaucracy in Canberra. By making universities more accountable to government in all aspects of their operations, the earlier autonomy of universities to set their own agenda and goals is now being significantly diminished.

Quality improvement

A transformative and developmental view of quality is evident within some universities. This model employs a notion of quality that begins from a bureaucratically imposed model of quality to escape from the preoccupation with structures, control and quantitative measures of performance. This is achieved by giving at least equal weight to the indispensable elements of our concepts of educational processes and outcomes, and their dependence on value judgements (Lindsay 1992 p. 154).

This transformative model relies on peer review and is concerned with enhancing the perspectives and interests of the university internally and is thus supported by those actually working within the university. At the core of this position is a commitment that the experiences of all participants must be enhanced. Accordingly, this view of quality bars any outside pressures dominating the activities as they relate to quality within a university, and empowers the participants by giving them the opportunity to influence their own transformation.

Quality within a QJ framework is future directed with its goals being the transformation of current practices. Incremental improvements occur because it is seen to be in the best interests of all staff and students. As such the organisation desires for improvement. According, decision making processes for improvement are devolved so that all staff are involved rather than the imposition from above. Because it is driven by the shared goals and needs of employees QJ satisfies the needs of internal stakeholders. Nevertheless, through the documentation of procedures it can also respond to the demands of external stakeholders.

Quality assurance vs Quality improvement

The two dominant perspectives on quality in higher education differ in many respects. The instrumentalist promote the view that quality can be measured as long as the "right" instruments are developed. There is an over emphasis on obtaining results from the measurement of inputs and outputs, with no attempt being made to understand the processes that underlie the system. This in turn provides the basis for identifying current deficiencies and for rewarding "good practice". Primarily it is an external procedure in which outside agencies find ways of forming opinions and judgments about the activities of the institution. This viewpoint is built around an assessment of an institution's past performance and is circumvented by economic indicators. Consequently it is concerned with documenting the past instead of providing the basis for future policy planning and activity. Table 1 below summarises the major differences between the institutional QJ model and the transformative QJ model.

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As Table 1 shows there is conceptual distance between the purposes of QJ and QI. Quality assurance is concerned with identifying the requirements of the market, whereas quality improvement is concerned with identifying the requirements of other particular object, issue, programme or set of activities. On the other hand, QI is concerned with identifying the best way of improving the way it relates to issues, programmes, processes or sets of activities. With such a conceptual distance, it would at first glance, that there is little capacity to bring these two competing models into a useful relationship. Nevertheless, I argue that it is possible to make the two processes complementary. Accordingly, if the QJ process begins with the mapping of means for improvement, it is then possible to integrate that mapping process through the identification and documenting of strengths and weaknesses. The documentation then serves as the basis for evidence of excellence to assist stakeholders and other audiences that the strength of outcomes achieved is possible, with the parallel process of improvement. In this context, while QA and QI may be uncomfortable bedfellows, they are able to be brought together in a practical partnership. While QJ has been a powerful force in directing the activities of universities, internally driven approaches that are closer to the needs and interests of the University itself may well provide a better long term response to external pressures. Such a shift would make QA and QJ complement the collaborative processes and an integral aspect of university management and decision making.

Conclusion

Quality in its many forms has now come to exert considerable pressure on the activities within universities. Increasing demands are being made on universities to be publicly accountable which in turn has meant that various measures have been implemented to satisfy this external scrutiny. It has been argued that the current quality measures are focused on the functional aspects of the institution and now require an understanding of the nature and purpose of universities, and mechanisms for public, accountability, has come into question. In practice this has meant the imposition of externally defined versions of what universities stand for and their contribution to the economic enhancement of the state. Thus, I suggest may not be the best long term perspective for many universities and the various groups inside and outside universities. While recognising the political need to enhance accountability measures, I maintain that accountability should not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, I propose a view of QJ in which both the needs of the various internal stakeholders are directed towards the institution and the same time responding to the external pressures of accountability inherent within QA. Finally, I see the need to create a balance between the tension caused by the demands of external accountability as explicit within QA and the context specific elements of QJ. In this respect I concur with Burset's (1992, p. 11) position: "In higher education, whatever its variations, a single mode checklist approach to safeguarding quality is misguided, ineffective and pernicious." Importantly, by internalising a culture that values quality in all of its variant forms and the development of a quality driven institutional culture across the university, individual practice will be transformed and external demands to be accountable will also be met.

References


Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education conference titled "Challenging Challenges: Research and Reform in Education" November 1993.
2. This incentive money will be offered to universities on a competitive basis to acknowledge and reward outstanding outcomes in teaching, research and community service. Funds are administered through a special committee which will award them to up to half of the universities in the country following the assessment of each institution's comprehensive self-study reports.

Bibliography

Australia Universities' Review