Tensions and tendencies in the management of quality assurance and autonomy in Australian higher education

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Individual academic staff members work within an institutional environment which reflects and responds to external demands and values in a specific way. The underlying assumption is that if the work environment of academic staff is enhanced and the ethos of the institutions is pre-education, students will benefit. Enhancing quality is thus free from a need to individual members of academic staff. Where the ethos of an institution expects, supports and rewards staff who continually strive to improve teaching, courses and assessment practices we can be sure that the quality of students’ learning environment is enhanced. However, with increasing emphasis on the whole question of public accountability by government and committees of enquiry, the assessment of quality is no longer left to the individual staff member. The compatibility of quality assurance with academic autonomy is a key question facing higher education systems everywhere.

Background

Assessment is one of the key processes in higher education. Much has been written about it, there is a lot of interest concerning appropriate assessment and criteria for assessment, yet it determines many of the educational processes. In terms of assessment of student learning and student quality, all academic staff assess, whether they are aware of the instructions of assessment or not. Students sometimes complain, there is some education about assessment, but generally things go on as they always have and the system functions. Assessment of quality of academic staff performance, instead of departmental and institutional performance, and not least of management performance is newer. Over the past fifteen years the whole question of public accountability was given prominence by government and committees of enquiry. For over a decade reviews of faculties, departments, disciplines and programs pointed to shortcomings in the organisation and delivery of teaching and institutional and departmental management. Government intervened when in 1998 it abolished the binary line between the university sector and the advanced education sector and set in motion a series of amalgamations between colleges and institutes of technology, colleges and universities, and colleges and colleges to form new institutions. Amalgamation led to a dramatic decrease in the number of higher education institutions, with a corresponding increase in institutional size. All of these joined the ‘Unified National System’ - a higher education system publicly funded and working within a particular framework. The framework includes national organised institutional profiles as to student enrolment, and adhere to a range of efficiency and equity initiatives. For the annual profile visits institutions have to prepare a research management plan which demonstrates that the institution is concentrating research expenditure to build up areas of excellence, a capital management plan, a financial plan, an equity plan which provides evidence of the institution’s concern for access and progress of ‘equity groups’, and a plan for protecting the admission and progress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students.

The federal government steers higher education through a variety of funding mechanisms. First, growth in publicly funded places has to be negotiated. Second, through various funding schemes, institutions are invited to bid for money to improve their management, their communication, use of technology in teaching, academic staff development, and to develop innovative teaching projects. Third, from 1995 the research quantum, the government funding for research allocated to institutions as part of the operating grant, is based on performance indicators, both input and output ones.

Australian approach to quality assurance

While performance-based funding is becoming more common generally, so to quality assurance. The Australian government is firmly placed within the international movement towards quality assurance and assessment in higher education. But it is unique in that it provides rewards to those institutions which can demonstrate both excellent quality assurance processes and outcomes.

In 1993 the first round of Quality Reviews took place, conducted by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (COQAHE) and assisted by reviewers nominated from within the higher education system and selected from industry. Institutions were asked to submit a portfolio of 20 pages plus appendices where they established their claim for excellence. All institutions were visited for one day; in the case of the day for 60 people were interviewed, the visiting panel wrote a report, and in March 1994 the results were announced. Institutions were put into six groups; institutions in Group 1 were assessed as having excellent outcomes in research, teaching and learning and community services; and well developed planning processes which support the quality assurance processes, and evidence of international as well as national recognition. They received 3% of their operating grant as reward money which, in the case of a large university, might be $5-6 million.

Institutions in Group 5 received 1% of their operating grant for having sound outcomes in focused areas but less well developed processes; or improving outcomes supported by generally sound processes. Institutions in Group 6 (n=8) received consolation prizes.

The first round of the Committee’s quality review was heavily criticised: the process for its lack of transparency and criteria for recognising excellence, and the outcome for its close correlation to institutional size. In 1994 the focus was on teaching and learning. The Committee looked at:

- overall planning and management of the undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and learning program;
- curriculum design;
- delivery and assessment;
- evaluation, monitoring and review;
- learning outcomes;
use of effective innovative teaching and learning methods; 

- postgraduate supervision; 

- student support services and other teaching support services such as tutoring and learning support; and 

- staff recruitment, promotion and development.

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The Committee reviewed the materials submitted by the institutions, considered the evidence provided, and made recommendations for the future.

The Committee, in its report published in 1995, recommended that: 

1. The government should provide a clear and consistent policy framework for the development of quality assurance systems in higher education. 

2. Institutions should be required to develop and implement quality assurance systems that are consistent with national standards. 

3. The government should provide funding for the development and implementation of quality assurance systems. 

4. Institutions should be required to report annually on the implementation of their quality assurance systems.

The Committee concluded that the development of quality assurance systems is a critical component of the reform of higher education in Australia. It recommended that the government provide a clear and consistent policy framework to guide institutions in the development of quality assurance systems. It also recommended that institutions be required to report annually on the implementation of their quality assurance systems. The Committee recognized the importance of quality assurance systems in ensuring the quality of higher education in Australia.
vancement (5) is possible by successful applications to positions at other universities and within the same institution through promotion. There is provision of growth opportunities (6) through special studies programs or sabbatical leave, through organized staff development activities and through the flexibility due to a relatively small amount of scheduled activities. Stana (7) is conferred by virtue of being a member of the academic staff, at whatever rank, and through awards conferred by learned societies in recognition of one’s scholarship.

The two theories are quite complementary. Academics find that their work intrinsically satisfying, they value the complexity of the work, their autonomy, the relationship with and responsibility for other people. Eutectic criteria such as salary increases, competitiveness, and heavy emphasis on evaluation would result in performance which meets external requirements but does not go beyond them, with a marked reduction in opportunities to add value to their work and to sustain staff motivation. But generally, studies have shown that academic work satisfaction seems to be highly related to their perception of how much control they have over their work environment.

A crisis of confidence

The recent Carnegie Foundation Report on the Academic Profession (Hryon, Altbach and Whisnant 1994) provides a snapshot of academic staff perceptions and experiences. Some of the data illustrate that there is a crisis of confidence. Australia’s staff at the core face do not believe that the government should define the role that higher education system has been defined, and institutions are being evaluated in how their mission meets the national goals. After Korea, Australian academic staff most often agreed with the statement that there was too much government interference in important academic policies.

Academics believe that the university administration is in collusion with the government. Many academic staff see the administration as autocratic, more than half of them believe that communication between academics and the administration is poor; more than two-thirds would regard the relationships between academic staff and administration as fair or poor.

Of interest is that in the academic sphere there is much autonomy. Over 80% of Australian respondents agreed that they could focus their research on any topic of special interest to them, and two-thirds agreed that at their institution, they were fully free to determine the content of the courses they teach.

Both results are heartening. For the past few years, research management plans have concentrated resources into areas of institutional strength. But individual researchers or research teams still have opportunities to apply for competitive research grants in areas of their individual expertise. In terms of course content one may have well expected that fewer academic staff would have felt that they had full freedom to determine course contents. Professional associations, for example, which credential university awards exert a very strong influence on the curriculum as well. However, this trend is not due to the additional work decreases which are of academic quality.

If the external environment is exerting pressure on the organisation or parts of it, those pressures need to be considered (ibid.). There is no doubt that the pressure through the impending quality review led to widespread redevelopment and introduction of procedures in many institutions. But I still strongly believe that many of these features will disappear once the reviews have finished, unless the external agenda has become an internal one, supported by academic staff and administrators alike. Institutions need to highjack external agendas and make them internal ones - change efficiency agendas to educational ones.

Conclusions

The individual university teacher in his or her involvement with students has the most direct impact on the quality of student learning and educational experience. Academics work best in a stimulating, challenging but supportive environment, where they have a fair amount of autonomy and creative space. It goes without saying that the more basic needs mentioned earlier, like some sort of security and decent remuneration have to be met first. Academics experience an improvement on their autonomy and creative space through performance reviews, audit evaluations, accreditation, pressure for open consultation, pressure for inclusion of stakeholders views, pressure to obtain research grants, pressure to publish, pressure to plan, predict, perform according to negotiated standards - all of this with reduced funding. These pressures, if not resolved, lead to:

- reactive curricula which prepare students for immediate employment but not for taking up leadership positions in society or showing the flexibility they need in a fast-changing environment;
- "a public servant mentality" where academic staff are not prepared to give their best but only what they are required to do;
- more and more research projects being undertaken because funding is available, not because the problem was worth solving or the researcher was driven by curiosity; and
- more and more publications, which no one reads but the journal editor, thus adding to the information overload and wasting scarce resources.

Administrators/managers are pressured or perceive that they are pressured to follow government directives and hence pass on all requirements. For the Quality Audit and Assessment processes, quite a number of universities have tried to impose uniform regulations on all departments; quite a number have established quality committees (despite a committee structure which was meant to ensure quality assurance and education), and positions of Quality Manager or (Pro Vice-Chancellor). Much of this is unnecessary. Administrators/managers have choices they have not used enough:

- They can negotiate with academic staff a framework for quality enhancement and let faculties and departments work within that framework - a top-down and bottom-up approach.
- They can mediate between government demands and demands made by the nature of academic work and education itself to ensure that all quality enhancement strategies are internalised as part of academic work.
- They can translate the alienating jargon into an educational discourse so that academic staff will participate in these processes.

They can use to the fullest the autonomy institutions have.

The tendency to slavishly and literally follow what government, sometimes quite tentatively, requests needs to be replaced by procedures which evolve from within the higher education system.

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