
Assuring Quality in Higher Education: The New Zealand Experience

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Abstract

With the expansion of higher education across the globe in response to the creation of knowledge economies and learning societies, governments have become increasingly interested in ensuring value for money from their investments. In determining their comparative economic advantage, nation states have increasingly focused on the ‘quality’ of their education provision and knowledge production. Quality assurance has become standard practice and an ‘output’ of universities. However, it is not clear that there are standards of good practice in quality assurance, or that quality assurance processes are internally consistent, and there is some evidence that quality assurance processes are applied without sufficient attention to context. This article describes a study conducted in New Zealand that illustrates the ways institutions have attempted to satisfy both internal and external quality assurance requirements in an era of considerable change in the status, significance and management of higher education. The methodological approach used combined literature review, document analysis, face-to-face interviews and data gathering through a national survey of institutional managers in order to elicit views on internal and external processes of quality assurance. The research showed that increased surveillance by quasi-state quality agencies contributes to a mismatch between established quality assurance processes of educational institutions and those required by quality agencies. In conclusion, quality is an enigmatic notion, challenging the interpretations and implementation strategies of government agencies and tertiary institutions.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, New Zealand

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The emergent international agenda for higher education policy is anchored in globalisation and the development of knowledge economies and learning societies. The transition to a global knowledge economy is dependent on the creation and application of

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new knowledge and consequently this has placed greater demands on education, research and entrepreneurial activities in higher education (Weber & Duderstadt, 2008).

Over the past decade international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank have played a significant role in shaping a global market for higher education. The OECD (1996) policy agenda promoting further and higher education as a key to the development of global knowledge-based economy has influenced economic and education policies of nations. Ball (1998) argues that, at an international level, a coherent group of policies and processes has emerged and national higher education policies increasingly are following global agendas. During the late 1990s many governments undertook policy work on the future of further and higher education, including a focus on its quality and contribution to economic and social development, for example, in the United Kingdom (Dearing, 1997), in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1997) and in Australia (West, 1997).

In 2002, the World Bank promoted market-driven innovation as the key to comparative economic advantage and a knowledge economy, and also emphasised the importance of research outputs being converted into economic results. Nations influenced by this policy trajectory responded with their own set of steering policies in relation to the quality of research and knowledge transfer (for example, New Zealand [New Zealand Government, 2002; Hall, Morris Matthews and Sawicka, 2004], the United Kingdom [HM Treasury, 2003; HM Treasury, 2008] and Australia [Nelson, 2002, 2003]). Consequently, the traditional relationship between universities and the state changed, with much rhetoric about repositioning universities as key players in the creation of the knowledge society and as significant contributors to economic competitiveness and the creation of wealth.

Governments throughout this period sought greater control over universities' activities and assurance about the quality of their investments. Quasi-state institutions (such as funding bodies and quality agencies) were established in many countries as part of the political evolution of quality assurance—for example, in New Zealand (Jennings, 2007; Weir, 2006), in Australia (Vidovich, 1999, 2002, 2004) and in the United Kingdom (Harvey, 2005, Filippakou & Tapper, 2007).

The concern for quality in higher education is not new. Medieval universities were self-governing communities of fellows mediating their own quality and these traditions continued, with universities operating as autonomous institutions. Globalisation significantly changed the world-view on how higher education should be organised, managed, funded and held accountable through quality assurance processes. Efforts to implement external quality assurance into universities have proved controversial. There is growing tension between collegial quality assurance, focused on scholarly excellence and embodying traditional university values and norms, with the more managerial approach taken by some external quality bodies. Often the approach taken by quality bodies is founded on a broad definition of quality as fitness for purpose and primarily focused on the management, monitoring and control of quality processes that support teaching and research and increasingly, knowledge transfer.

A growing research literature has focused on the implementation of quality assurance systems globally, nationally and locally (Carr, Hamilton, & Meade, 2005; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Ursin, 2007; Van Damme, 2001; Vidovich, 1999). Marginson and Rhoades' (2002) 'glonacal' approach emphasises the significance of global, national and local contexts in shaping higher education. Ursin (2007) argued the importance of context in mediating global quality discourses and processes. Ursin's study reported on how quality assurance policy initiatives in Finland are shaped by global pressures, the European Higher Education Area and Finnish higher education policies and how academics locally interpret policies. Van Damme (2001) argued the need for an international and sustainable policy framework for recognition, quality assurance and accreditation. He cautioned that globalisation in higher education does not necessarily mean international standardisation, but rather there is a need to balance global and local contexts. Vidovich (1999) reported on an analysis of quality in higher education policy from macro policy level to localised micro context of individual Australian universities. She argued that quality policy increased inequalities within universities and between universities and also enhanced competition.

External quality audit as a mechanism for quality assuring universities has been strongly debated globally, with opponents advocating abandoning the process while others believing that it has made a worthwhile contribution to higher education (Carr et al., 2005). There appears to be a scarcity of empirical evidence globally that examines the impact of external quality audit. Carr et al. (2005) examined the impact of external quality audits over a period of 10 years on one New Zealand university within the context of its own quality initiatives and government quality initiatives. They investigated whether it was possible to isolate the independent effects of external quality audit and concluded that effectiveness evaluations have a more solid basis when the combined effects of both university and government initiatives are examined collectively with external quality audit. The authors reported that external quality audit can act as a catalyst for quality improvements, as well as validation for university initiated reform.

One of the challenges facing any government is how to define and measure the quality of its education provision. According to Sallis (1993) 'quality is perplexing to define and more difficult to measure' (p. 3). Despite the unclear and complex nature of quality, many writers have attempted to define its use in education (for example, Doherty, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Sallis, 1993; Vidovich, 2004). However, no single view has emerged. The notion of 'quality' can be perceived as excellence, perfection or consistency, value for money, transformation and fitness for purpose. The measurement of quality is problematic and usually involves outcome-orientated assessment using 'agreed' qualitative criteria and/or quantitative measures. Brooks (2005) points out that assessment practices should be methodologically reliable. The measurement of quality of teaching and learning is contestable and assessment practices need to be robust for determining 'good' teaching and learning (Jones & Darshi de Saram, 2005).

Quality assurance consists of institutional policies and procedures necessary to ensure the quality of educational programs and scholarship, including research, is maintained and enhanced (Woodhouse, 1998). External quality agencies are required to

routinely check that institutions have appropriate and effective quality assurance processes and procedures in place. Externally evaluating quality has the effect of ranking institutions against each other, and this may not sit comfortably with the traditions of the universities or with their own definitions of quality, let alone academic views about entitlement to judge what is ‘good’ in student performance or research. External and internal judgments of quality may be in tension, especially where economic values drive judgments of academic performance. Morley (2003) argues quality assurance may be viewed as a political response to growing concerns over the need to manage risk in modern society and contends that the state has moved ‘from promoting intellectual activities to controlling them’ (pp. 47–66). Quality assurance processes and evaluation and assessment of performance more generally may be understood as a form of ‘steering’ or ‘governing’ education (Ozga, 2009).

This article contributes to the growing body of empirical research on quality in higher education by examining the impact of the emergent global quality agenda on individual universities in the New Zealand context. In response to the global policy agenda of redesigning education purposes to advance economic and social development, the New Zealand Government moved swiftly to ensure that education reforms would meet national goals and have quality embedded in subsequent legislative requirements. This is the context for the New Zealand study that looks at the attempted cultural shift from institutional autonomy over quality matters to accountability to external quality agencies. The quality processes and perspectives of universities are discussed with a focus on shifting quality discourses and the responses of academics to the perceived threats to academic freedom. The main aim of this study was to identify and explore the debate and subsequent problems that emerged when tertiary (further and higher) education institutions attempted to satisfy the requirements of both internal and external quality assurance. Research aims were:

- To examine global influences on government policies and analyse the education policies that drove legislation which created a demand for quality assurance.
- To investigate how quality assurance bodies responded to their legislative roles and responsibilities, and how their responses impacted on institutions.
- To elicit the opinions of senior institutional academic managers on the impact of external quality assurance on their institutions.

Methods

The research was divided into two phases. First, a literature review of education policy was undertaken in relation to the establishment of quality assurance authorities and their implementation of external academic quality audit. A key focus of the analysis was on the global influences on government education policies and theoretical underpinnings of the state sector reforms and their application to the establishment of quality assurance in the tertiary sector. Second, the research surveyed views of senior academic managers from 22 institutions from across the tertiary sector (using a self-administered questionnaire, face-to-face interviews and document analysis) about issues faced as each entered their respective external quality assurance frameworks and operated within them. The 30

senior managers who were invited to speak on behalf of their institutions held positions such as Vice Chancellor, Chief Executive and Academic Manager.

Seventeen institutions in the study were from the non-university sector coming under the umbrella of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, which operates a different quality assurance system to the one for universities that is explained later in this article. Discussion for this article focuses only on the data collected from five out of the total of nine universities from throughout New Zealand.

The study was informed by a theoretical evaluation methodology derived from Owen and Rogers (1999). Clarificative evaluation was used to examine literature and documents to help explain the links between government education policy, and responses of providers to these authorities. Monitoring evaluation was used to identify the success or otherwise of quality management systems or components in institutions. Currently, procedures used for assuring quality in the tertiary sector have an impact focus and, in the study, impact evaluation was used to examine the effects of external quality assurance on institutional behaviour.

Establishing external quality assurance in New Zealand

With the introduction of the *New Zealand Education Act 1989* and subsequent amendments, such as the *Education (Tertiary Reform) Amendment Act 2002*, New Zealand government-funded universities are required to contribute to national economic and social development goals through achieving excellence in their education programs, scholarship, research, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial activities. To ensure institutions' compliance with national goals, a range of accountability mechanisms were created, which included strengthening of governance reporting requirements and the establishment of quality assurance authorities.

Policy advice from Treasury officials to the government on reforming the public sector, including education, was based on popular neo-liberal administrative and economic theories that were travelling globally at that time. These included public choice theory, agency theory, and new public management (NPM). The policies arising from these theories were particularly influential in 'steering' the development of external quality assurance through government policy and their impact is reflected in documents analysed and interviews with senior managers.

Public choice theory

Public choice theory is based on the assumption that all human behaviour is dominated by self-interest (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996). The 'governing' policy recommendations from this theory aim to minimise the role of the state to restrain the functions of government agencies and to increase individual freedom. The aims of the *Education Amendment Act (1990)* were consistent with public choice theory in that they were designed to give institutions greater autonomy by limiting government intervention. Under the new legislation, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and the New Zealand Vice Chancellor's Committee (NZVCC) were to provide formalised and external quality assurance within the tertiary sector. Although institutions gained greater control over their affairs, ironically, accountabilities previously captured by professional

expectations and practices became external demands from quality assurance authorities. Analysis of university documents found that prior to the government's establishment of external quality bodies, institutions had effective internal quality assurance mechanisms in place, such as peer review and program review designed to encourage excellence and incorporated into professional practice.

Agency theory

Shapiro (2005) argues that all agency relationships experience agency costs that arise from a variety of sources such as providing incentives, monitoring, policing, and agents who oversee other agents. The application of agency theory by quality bodies in New Zealand has resulted in transferring agency transaction costs to institutions. Universities bear the costs of proving their compliance to external quality bodies. Institutions have shown concern about transaction costs imposed on them by quality bodies and questioned some of their processes of assuring quality:

According to Mitnick (1992), because principals cannot observe agent behaviour, they rely on 'imperfect surrogate measures', in this case audit, which can lead an agent (institutions) 'to displace their behaviour toward the surrogate in order to appear to be behaving well' (p. 79). Thus agency costs increase because institutions may be concentrating on activities that take them away from their core functions of teaching and research, suggesting that external quality monitoring may be of little benefit.

New public management (NPM)

New public management can be understood as a transfer of private sector management principles into the public sector (Boston et al., 1996). The public sector adopted these management principles and, in turn, they were introduced into universities in the form of new policy requirements of which quality assurance was part. Under NPM, the New Zealand Government placed emphasis on management skills and de-emphasised professional skills (Boston et al., 1996). This emphasis on management skills caused alarm in parts of the tertiary sector, particularly among universities, which valued collegiality. Collegiality in this context consisted of shared decision-making by members of various constituencies of the university who took responsibility for the quality and success of academic endeavours. For academics, the shift from an environment of collegiality to one that emphasised managerialism was seen as a threat to their autonomy by lessening their direct influence on the decisions affecting the quality of teaching and research.

External quality assurance of universities

The notion of collegiality and professional ethics that underpinned the traditional view of quality assurance held by the universities in this research was challenged by NPM ideology. Change was inevitable because the government required a mechanism to ensure universities were held publicly accountable. Under the 1990 legislation the New Zealand Vice Chancellor's Committee (NZVCC) was deemed the authority for the quality assurance of university programs and courses. It already had an established program approval process carried out by the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP).

Universities moved swiftly to form the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU) to ensure that they were in charge of their own quality assurance affairs and to distinguish them from the rest of the tertiary sector that came under the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). The definition of quality used in the university sector is ‘fitness for purpose’, which has wide application. ‘Purpose’ is taken to mean an institution’s objectives, as authorised by its council and approved by the government (Woodhouse, 1998). While there was agreement among the university leaders that they wanted to be in charge of their own quality assurance, this does not mean that their staff supported the concept of external academic audit. Academics were concerned that additional tasks associated with audit would detract from their teaching and research and threaten their academic freedom. The universities found themselves in the position of needing to ‘sell’ to their staff the benefits of institutional self-improvement, quality enhancement and internal quality assurance as well as meeting their legislative obligations to comply with external quality assurance requirements.

Audit as the key accountability mechanism

Audits are often justified as promoting transparency of both individual and corporate actions to interested parties such as stakeholders and the public (Power, 1994). Auditing was once primarily a financial activity but now it became a hugely significant and resource intensive education activity. Audit has been adopted as a key mechanism for providing assurance to stakeholders and the public that tertiary institutions are meeting their stated goals, thus shifting power from professionals to the public. Audit also allows the government to enhance ‘indirect control’ over publicly funded institutions.

Quality bodies are responsible to the government and are therefore concerned with making sure their audit system for institutions produces sufficient proof that they have met their statutory obligations. It is in the interest of the quality body to systematise the process in order to make it easier to analyse and report the results of audit. Part of the systemisation of audit is to produce a ‘guide to audit’.

The Director of the NZUAAU designed and documented an audit process that was agreed to by the universities, thus making the process systematic. Although not necessarily its intention, one of the useful ways to help universities to adapt to becoming auditees was to provide a comprehensive audit manual explaining generic principles for quality, terminology, and quality criteria for auditing all institutional activities including research and teaching. The NZUAAU audit processes included requiring pre-audit information, triangulation of audit data during an on-site visit, and checking the factual accuracy of an audit report prior to publication.

Impact of external quality assurance practices on universities

There have been both intended and unintended consequences as a result of the implementation of external quality assurance. It is argued here that there is a mismatch between internal and external quality assurance requirements for universities. Prior to the implementation of a managerial approach to external academic audit, universities had collegial systems in place to assure quality of their research and teaching. This mismatch has, on occasion, created tension within a university and between the university and the quality body.

Establishment of positions for quality assurance

In the early 1990s staffing positions in universities, such as quality manager, academic manager and quality coordinator, were created to manage and coordinate both internal and external quality assurance activities. The establishment of quality management positions is purported to have altered the structure of academic power by creating a division between the managers and the managed (academics). Managers have the power to reorganise, control and regulate the work and conditions of academic staff, lessening their perceived academic freedom.

Quality management documents

As a result of external audit emphasis was placed on systematic and regular review of quality policies and programs. Regular program reviews were considered essential as they ensured currency of qualifications and programs and attested to meeting quality standards, their own and their peers. However, the review processes were often complex, costly and time-consuming.

Control over external audit

The universities in the study saw themselves as responsible for their own quality assurance. They developed strategies designed to give them some control over the processes of external audit by conducting pre-visit mock audits and holding staff training on audit procedures. The universities generally referred to the guidelines provided by NZUAAU, but also found themselves drawing on generic concepts for measuring organisational performance developed by private industry, such as ‘customer focus’, which traditionally had not played a part in universities’ consideration of quality outputs. Nor had universities traditionally carried out activities such as employee satisfaction surveys.

Influence of external monitoring on universities’ quality systems

Some of the quality improvements made by universities have been attributed to the influence of NZUAAU or CUAP, either directly (related to report recommendations) or indirectly, as a result of preparation for external audit—for example, the codification of policies and processes. However, not all universities were convinced that external monitoring was a driver for their quality improvements.

University managers identified the main advantages of external quality audit as: accountability to stakeholders, a stimulus to document and codify quality systems, a stimulus for self-review, external validation, enabling the identification of areas for improvement and providing leverage for action, helping to protect institutions in an increasingly litigious environment, and safe-guarding the interests of students.

University managers identified many disadvantages and unintended consequences of external quality assurance. They noted considerable increase in the compliance costs associated with quality assurance activities, with no additional funding. New

administration and management positions were created to coordinate and administer quality assurance activities. For some staff the newly created positions provided an opportunity for promotion but, on the other hand, some academics viewed the creation of these positions as additional bureaucracy that threatened autonomy over teaching and research. Academics were required to participate in additional compliance work such as preparation for external audit and this detracted from their teaching and research.

University managers considered that some of the ideas from quality bodies about how to run an institution were unrealistic, as demonstrated in some of their audit recommendations. They expressed concern at the apparent lack of competence of some auditors to conduct audit, resulting in inappropriate recommendations. They were also concerned that the auditing period was too short for the auditors to sufficiently know the institution. All managers challenged some of the audit findings on their institutions and were successful in having changes made to their reports. Managers thought there was not enough time between audits to implement recommendations, as some of them could take years and require significant resources. Some university managers were concerned that their staff suffered from audit fatigue.

Audit has become a permanent part of the routine process of evaluating universities. Universities in the research were more accepting of NZUAAU's processes, particularly after the first round of audit. Greater emphasis has been placed on sharing good practice through, for example, publications on universities' own websites as well as through publications on the NZUAAU website and their annual quality enhancement meeting.

The introduction of Performance-Based Research Funding (PBRF) in 2003 had the effect of increasing staff workload and extending external surveillance of research activities, beyond those carried out by NZUAAU. The PBRF is an example of government attempting to legitimise the notion of quality as value for money and an attempt to steer higher education research into contributing to national economic goals. Tertiary institutions are awarded funding based on a system that includes the awarding of grades to academic staff based on their research outputs. A funding formula is then used to decide the amount awarded to an institution, based on staff grades as well as thesis completions and external income (Hall, Morris Matthews, & Sawicka, 2004).

Discussion

The cost and burden to universities of compliance to external quality assurance is significant. Universities did not receive additional funding in order to meet their external obligations. They expressed concern about the excessive amount of manager, administrator and academic time to carry out external compliance activities. Some university managers reported that their staff were beginning to suffer from audit fatigue. The significant resources required by universities to meet their external quality assurance requirements has resulted in them questioning the extent to which cyclic audits carried out by NZUAAU added value to their operations.

The concerns identified by the senior managers in this research were subsequently acknowledged by the current Director of NZUAAU, who noted that after 12 years (covering three cycles) of audits, universities were showing signs of audit fatigue and questioned the value of successive cycles of audit (Jennings, 2007). Universities also questioned the value of continuing to spend significant funding, resources and time on self-reviews in order to meet external audit requirements (Jennings, 2007). This set of circumstances challenged NZUAAU, which is accountable to the university sector yet is not free to act outside government requirements.

Government intervention in higher education intensified in 2006 with the introduction of a new set of ‘outcome’-focused tertiary education reforms aimed at measuring institutional performance against government priorities and strengthening quality assurance and monitoring requirements (New Zealand Cabinet, 2006). These reforms further threatened the autonomy of institutions over their operations and highlight the pressing need to harmonise the conformist forces of accountability and compliance to national policy goals with the creative forces of transformation and enhancement of universities’ research and teaching activities. Conversely, in 2009 the university sector continues (with significant cost and burden) to comply with external quality assurance requirements through participating in the NZUAAU Cycle 4 (2008–2012) of academic audit.

Conclusions

The move towards global knowledge economies has resulted in governments around the world responding to the emergent global education agenda through education reforms designed to meet their national economic and social goals. These goals become embedded in legislation and steer the policy direction of higher education. The concern for quality has emerged as part of these reforms and challenges both the traditional academic notion of collegial quality assurance and that of the managerial approach adopted by quality bodies.

The emphasis of quality bodies’ external audits in New Zealand was not so much on institutions demonstrating good teaching and learning (some would say at the heart of education) as it was on institutions having quality control of the systems to support teaching and learning. Power shifted from the people in the institutions to a system of indirect government control through quality bodies using monitoring evaluation to check that institutions were ‘on track’ for meeting desired outcomes. University managers from the study supported the notion that quality is best assured by institutions having direct sense of ownership of their quality procedures both at individual and institutional levels.

For New Zealand’s higher education sector to compete successfully in the global knowledge economy it must have in place quality systems that emphasise transparency, accountability and comparability with other quality systems internationally. A dilemma faces the New Zealand Government with regard to quality assurance of the tertiary sector, that is, to find a suitable balance between the policy goal of assuring the quality of the education it funds, and the administrative aim of ensuring that institutions have greater control over their own goals, operations, and associated quality assurance activities. In

conclusion, quality is an enigmatic notion, challenging the interpretations and implementation strategies of government quality agencies and institutions.

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