Strange yet compatible bedfellows: Quality assurance and quality improvement[1]

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The 1990s have seen the emergence of 'quality' as a significant issue in higher education policy and institutional practice. The response to these policy initiatives and their implementation within universities has varied according to their histories, organisational structures and leadership styles. However, two distinct categories: quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) appear to have emerged to become the dominant models of quality within Australian tertiary institutions. Current debates about quality in Australia are driven by political and economic agendas imposed by the Federal Government. Not surprisingly then, the form quality takes within universities has become an arena for debate. Consequently a tension has emerged at the institutional level between quality as a measure for accountability and quality as a means for transformation and improvement. In this paper, I argue that current higher education policies are predisposed toward a quality assurance position rather than a more transformative quality improvement one. In developing the argument, I examine how 'quality' is presented in current policy documents from the Federal Government, and suggest that quality improvement may be used to transform and generate new practices while at the same time meeting the external pressures of account-ability.

Quality as political

The issue of quality in higher education is essentially political, and becomes a site for struggle over competing ideological perspectives serving different personal and institutional agendas and interests. Vroeijenstijn (1990, p. 23) observes that 'the interpretation of the concept of quality depends on the person who sets the objectives'. There are various interested parties, each of whom defines quality in accordance with objectives set by themselves. These may run parallel with general policy orientations, but they can also be conflicting. 'The debate over quality in higher education then, should be seen for what it is: a power struggle where the use of terms reflects a jockeying for position in the attempt to impose own definitions of quality' (Barnett 1992, p. 6). The current debate within higher education regarding quality has focused significant public attention on what is actually happening within universities with the view to making these institutions more publicly accountable. This public scrutiny may well be seen as encouraging and signifying a cultural shift in terms of how quality is conceptualised. The effect of this is not inconsiderable for if, as Lindsay (1992, p. 161) suggests, '"quality" is to be interpreted narrowly or simply used as a tool to pursue a less welcome goal, then it represents a confusing and dangerous development. He observes that 'unfortunately, some signs point to the latter.' Competing models are now emerging and are being promoted by different interest groups inside and outside of universities, each of which has its own ideas as to what constitutes quality, how it is implemented and how it is measured.

Universities now have the twofold task of having to satisfy the multiple and competing demands of external stakeholders while at the same time, maintaining their own particularistic and unique needs and goals. In practice however, the views of centralised bureaucracies within government have a view of quality that is concerned with satisfying the demands of external accountability. As Peters (1992) quite rightly claims:

Underlying the ostensible concern for improved public sector accountability is an instrumental economic rationality exemplified in the now dominant belief in the use of market forces to induce greater efficiency. (p. 127)

While it is acknowledged that this view may well be prevalent at the level of government policy, the position taken in this paper is that practices to promote quality within some Australian universities reflect a view that is concerned with the development and improvement of present and future practices which can at the same time meet the demands of external scrutiny.

Quality in policy discourse

Higher education policies have emerged within an economic context in which greater demands are being made to increase output, while at the same time not increasing financial input. In other words, universities are being asked to do more with less. As Yeatman (1993) observes 'what we have seen is the replacement of public policy objectives couched in terms of social goods by public policy objectives couched in terms of economic goods' (p. 3) To this end higher education has been transformed from a social policy contributing to the overall 'good' of the society to a sub-sector of economic policy in which the economic agenda comes to dominate academic life. New management structures have emerged in response to the current political and economic situation which, Peters (1992) argues, have had significant effects on higher education.

What we can say, without doubt, is that we have witnessed a fundamental change in the political ideology in higher education, a change that will set the parameters within which higher education is to be conceived and practiced for a considerable period to come. Underlying the change is the call for greater productivity and for improved efficiency and effectiveness. (p. 126-7)

As Ball (1993, p. 13) maintains 'policies typically posit a restructuring and redistribution of power relations, so that different people can and cannot do different things'. In the case of the policy on quality, restructuring and redistribution takes two forms. Redistribution is in terms of resource allocation, especially given the allocation of reward funds by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE)[2]. Restructuring is in terms of the development of practices within the universities to measure outcomes and increase inputs by promoting activities that come under the rubric of quality. This restructuring arises, in part, from pressure from outside stakeholders to hold universities accountable for all aspects of their academic and administrative operations.

It is in such a context that the 'quality' agenda has come to represent a solution to a particular set of problems, although these are more often perceived rather than real, which are seen to be rooted within the broader economic context of Australia as a competitive international market. The problems articulated within the policy documents themselves represent the managerial interests of a centralised bureaucracy in Canberra which advocates the dogma of economic rationalism in which markets and prices are the only reliable means of setting value on anything (Pusey, 1993). The problems which current policy is attempting to address are best seen

in the manner approached by Beilharz (1987, p. 389), who claims that:

Problems are not given but constructed, agendas are not self-evident but are produced as though they were; policy making is an instrumental exercise which necessarily fails to see itself as such.

The view that there are problems within higher education in Australia has been voiced by advocates of the conservative restoration agenda to serve the interests of groups who have affiliations with Right Wing politics. This disquiet is frequently expressed in concerns about the "quality of graduates", "quality of teaching" and perceived low levels of competitive international research productivity. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the quality of graduates is superior or inferior to those 10 years ago, nor is there evidence that teaching in universities is of a poor or inferior standard. Furthermore, there is no recognition that universities do have existing procedures in place (such as committee structures, course approval processes and the like) to ensure accountability. The federal government has supported the view that higher education institutions in Australia are not operating efficiently or effectively and should become more publicly accountable in terms of their expenditure and their productivity. This in turn has led to a situation in which the state, under the guise of accountability, is advocating policies which will assist in greater external pressure being placed on universities.

These activities may also be seen to be part of an overall policy agenda in which education in general and higher education in particular act as an instrument for economic restructuring for increased productivity and competitiveness. To this end recent policy documents which have been influential in shaping the debate and directing institutional practice. These documents have both implicit and explicit messages as they relate to a preferred version of 'quality'.[3]

Messages within the policy documents

The problem of defining quality

At a general level it can be said that there are mixed messages within the policy documents themselves. On the one hand the documents are adamant that there is no one firm definition or position on quality. Interestingly, the attempt to define quality as presented in the HEC document 'Achieving Quality' is ambivalent to the extent that, 'Discussions about the quality of higher education start from the premise that no single, workable 'definition' about quality is possible; that quality in higher education is not a definable concept ...' (p. 6). Cullen (1992, p. 5) provides some evidence for the diversity in meaning of the concept:

Quality can mean some normative view of excellence, it can mean a lack of dysfunctions in the academic machine, it can mean orderly inputs and processes, it can mean status relative to colleagues in research and publication, it can mean the quality of the best students and their suitability for higher studies, it can mean the maintenance of skills and standards that suit various employers and professional groups, and it can mean teaching excellence in terms of knowledge added to students participating in programs. It can be generalised from programs to the overall activities of an institution or to a state or national system.

Regarding how the problem of the meaning of quality can be resolved Harvey and Green (1993) suggest: 'At best we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken' (p. 28). The policy documents examined have not gone this far.

Accountability

Following international trends the rhetoric of increased accountability has become a central theme within current policy. This in turn has meant that the government has come to exert greater control and

influence on the autonomy of universities than has previously been the case. Minister Baldwin's (1991) policy statement, 'Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s', asserts that 'Those who contribute to the costs of higher education have an interest in ensuring that the system offers value for money.' (p. 29). More specifically:

As self-governing bodies, institutions have a major responsibility for ensuring that the teaching process, their research efforts and their graduates are of a high quality (p. 29)

The message of accountability is further elaborated in Achieving Quality (HEC 1992, 5) where the position is very clear 'It is therefore inevitable, particularly in times of economic stringency, that questions are asked about the performance of universities, their quality and their return on the substantial investment of public monies'.

Under the guise of accountability policy documents have instructed universities to develop procedures that will ensure (assure) quality, by meeting the demands which have been defined by outside stakeholders. Thus the Higher Education Council (HEC 1991) paper The Quality of Higher Education, requires that universities have measures in place that will satisfy pressures from outside stakeholders. It is clearly stated: 'Real and enduring quality can only be achieved by actions of the universities themselves. The basis for these actions must be self-evaluation' (p. 74). Achieving Quality (HEC 1992) is firm in its position about stakeholders in that they:

All have legitimate perspectives on what constitutes a quality outcomes from our universities; and while there are undoubtedly close similarities between some of these views, there are also important differences, albeit only of emphasis (p. 9)

Institutional autonomy

A dominant message within all of the policy documents is that institutional autonomy will not be encroached through the 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 standards for performance against their own objectives, and to identify and provide the evidence necessary to gauge their success and to satisfy their various stakeholders ... Contrary to the claims of some the Government is not seeking to impose a uniform model of corporate management on the system, to the detriment of concepts of collegiality.

Similarly, the Higher Education Council (Achieving Quality 1992, p. 11) states that ...'any statement of purpose which is prescriptive should be dismissed out of hand. Nevertheless, despite such claims Peters (1992, p. 128) cautions that:

The result will be to impose an adversarial management cost-accounting culture on traditional structures of consensus style management and accountability. This will effectively cut across entrenched values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, collegiality, peer review, co-operation and support which are at the heart of both local and international communities.

These issues about 'traditional' university values are left silent in the policies. The drive for significant shifts in the management and conceptualisation of Australian universities are following global trends which are driven by economic demands and pressures. This is not to say that traditions should be steadfastly upheld and left unchallenged, for there is a need for institutions where large amounts of public monies are expended to be held accountable. Nevertheless, the drive for economic efficiencies may well have negative long term consequences.

To this point I have argued that the changing economic and political environment has exerted considerable pressure on universities to exhibit greater measures for accountability. This is to be achieved under the rubric of quality. It is within such a political and economic context that two competing models of quality (Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement) have become evident within institutional practices.

Two competing models of quality

Quality assurance

The instrumental QA 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 increased externally driven accountability. The tension arising within universities now is between the demands for external accountability and internal quality improvement.

Within a QA framework quality is treated as a synonym for "performance". Its advocates require the imposition of technical instruments, such 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 numbers of graduates, the number of post-graduate students, research income and so on as indicators of performance. Accordingly, it takes as its point of departure the values and interests 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 (Barnett, 1992). It could be said that the recently initiated Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) may well use such measures in its deliberations regarding the allocation of reward funds. This view is seen to be attractive by some because quite simply, as Lindsay (1992) argues, inputs are much easier to define and measure than outcomes.

Several issues emerge as being of concern as a result of the preference exhibited by bureaucrats for the QA model. First, the autonomy of the academy comes into question insofar as instrumentalist approaches make it all too easy for political interference and manipulation at all levels. Second, universities that once prided themselves on their independence and their ability to provide an external voice of critique find themselves silenced by the possibility of punitive resourcing actions. Third, the Australian university system that has credited itself on its diversity may well find itself under greater centralised control, not only in terms of resource allocation and programme profile but also in terms of more stringent forms of externally mandated accountability. The current situation is such that it is politically naive for institutions not to 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. 162) observation is apposite: 'While focusing 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 higher education'.

The support for QA 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 agendas 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 breaks 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 emphasis to the imponderable 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 favoured 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 voices dominating the activities as they relate to quality within a university, and empowers the partici-

pants by giving them the opportunity to influence their own transformation.

Quality within a QI framework is future directed with its goals being the transformation of current practice. Importantly, improvement occurs because it is seen to be in the best interests of all staff and is driven by the organisation's desire for improvement. Accordingly, 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, QI serves 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 instrumentalists promote the view that quality can be measured so 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 judgements about the activities of the institution. This viewpoint is built around an assessment of an institution's past performance and is circumscribed 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 instrumental QA model and the transformative QI model.

Table I Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement Compared

	Quality Assurance	Quality Improvement
Focus	accountability	improvement
Philosophy	instrumental	transformative
Locus of Control	external management/ government driven	internal driven by employees
Motive	government directives/ policies	organisation's desire for improvement
Social Relations	competitive	collegial
Relations	directive	negotiated
Management Style	authoritarian	consensual
Administrative Structures	centralised/bureaucratic	devolved/facilitative
Time	short-term	longer term
Evaluation	external audit	peer review
Audience	external stakeholders	internal stakeholders
Orientation	past practice	future possibility
Indicators of Success	quantitative	qualitative

As Table 1 shows there is conceptual distance between the purposes of QA and those of QI. In summary, on the one hand, QA is directed towards proving the value, worth or excellence of a particular object, issue, programme or set of activities. On the other hand, QI is directed towards identifying areas for improvement, as they relate to issues, programmes, processes or sets of activities. With this conceptual distance, it would appear 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 QI process begins with the mapping of areas 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 assure 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 QA 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 QI complementary processes and an integral aspect of university management and administration.

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 debate is essentially politically motivated. As a consequence 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. This, I suggest, may not be in the best long term interests of the various groups inside and outside universities. While recognising the political need to endorse accountability measures, I maintain that accountability should not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, I promote a view of QI in which both the needs of the various internal stakeholders are satisfied while at 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 implicit within QA and the context specific elements of QI. In this respect I concur with Barnett's (1992, p. 119) position: 'In higher education, whatever its validity in other contexts, such a single minded 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.

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Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education conference in Fremantle in 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 submission of portfolio documents and investigatory visits by audit panels.

3. The policy documents which have direct institutional practice include: Baldwin (1991) *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s*; Higher Education Council (1991) *The Quality of Higher Education*; Higher Education Council (1992) Achieving Quality. These policies have guided institutional practice as it relates to quality in higher education.