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Quality Assurance or Quality Enhancement: Lessons from the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews current and recent practice in the management of quality assurance in the UK, commenting on strengths and weaknesses. It discusses the impact of quality assessment on policies, structures, distribution of resources and the academic culture of higher education. It also raises questions about the cost effectiveness, reliability and validity of the information provided and whether the evolving systems can accommodate the increasing diversity of higher education. Drawing on the lessons of the UK system, the paper identifies criteria that could be used for informing and evaluating the academic quality assurance system currently being developed by the Malaysian Quality Assurance Division.

Introduction

At a time when Malaysian higher education institutions are coming under greater scrutiny from the recently established Quality Assurance Division (QAD) or *Jabatan Jaminan Kualiti*, what lessons can be learned from the UK which has had its own Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in place for the past decade? This paper reviews current and former practice in the management of quality assurance in higher education institutions in the UK. More specifically, it aims to:

1. Outline the main approaches and methods adopted in quality assurance programmes in relation to academic activities in the UK;
2. Comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches and methods adopted; and
3. Suggest criteria that may be used for informing and evaluating the academic quality assurance system being developed in Malaysia.

This paper has three particular audiences in mind: academics charged with the responsibility of managing higher education systems; reviewers involved in assessing the effectiveness of quality assurance systems; and senior managers in higher education.

Although this paper will concentrate on the British system, it is clear that quality assurance has become a key issue internationally for higher education. Brennan and Shah's (2000) analysis of 14 countries shows that managers of higher education systems and institutions from around the world are concerned about quality and how to put in place appropriate quality assurance mechanisms. Similarly, government ministers, bureaucrats, employers and business interests are all increasingly concerned about the outputs of higher education institutes and the suitability of graduates to meet workplace needs.

Quality assurance is a comparatively recent term in higher education vocabulary. While there are many definitions of quality assurance in the literature (e.g. Birnbaum, 1994; Lindsay, 1992; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1994), Harman (1998) argues it generally refers to systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or improved quality, and to enable stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved. As will be argued later, quality assurance should not only relate to quality assessment, it should also embrace enhancement. It will also be argued that changes taking place as a result of developments in quality assurance systems are as much to do with power and values as they are to do with quality. Getting the balance right between accountability and enhancement, and between reliance on external and internal processes, will be crucial. There is also a need to show quality assessment provides value for money and that it generates reliable and valid evidence.

Over the past decade in Britain, and around the world generally, the quality assurance movement has developed from a variety of factors. A major driving force has been community and government concerns about academic standards and the level of achievement of graduates in a time of major expansion of student numbers alongside decreasing government funding. Other major concerns have been the impact of increased international competitiveness, the need for increased mobility of the professional workforce, demands for greater accountability by public institutions, and pressure from employers and the professions for university courses to become more relevant to the work place. As will be discussed in the next section, in answer to such concerns, the British higher education

system has adopted a self-regulation approach in its relationship with the government, where the government set the policy framework so as to steer from some distance but put a major emphasis on monitoring performance.

As Brennan and Shah (2000) show, quality assurance is by no means a new idea in higher education, although in the past universities and government agencies employed different mechanisms and used different vocabulary, such as academic standards and academic coherence. In Britain, most major higher institutions had in place various mechanisms of review and assessment; however, through greater government intervention, a more systematic and far-reaching approach was adopted to ensure that institutions had in place mechanisms for review and assessment, and for renewal and improvement. Compared to past approaches, which mainly relied upon the external examination system, the new mechanism puts much more emphasis on external scrutiny, seeking the views of employers and graduates, and making the results more widely available.

The British Approach to Quality Assurance Management: Method and Process

In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act established the setting up of a statutory external evaluative regime acceptable to all the major stakeholders – the Department for Education, the Higher Education Funding Councils, employers and students, and the institutions themselves and their representative bodies. A 'dual' regime was introduced to assess the quality of the education provided by institutions (Teaching Quality Assessment or TQA provided by the Higher Education Funding Councils) and to audit the institutions' quality assurance arrangements (provided by a body owned by and answerable to the institutions: the Higher Education Quality Council). The national quality agencies were therefore generally seen as possessing a considerable degree of operational autonomy using a form of 'peer review' as their primary methods.

Initially TQA led, in England, to one of three judgements being made on the provision being assessed: excellent/satisfactory/unsatisfactory; this was subsequently changed to a graded numerical scale for each aspect of quality assessed (1–4, where 1 meant 'strongly disapproved' and 4 meant 'strongly approved'). By contrast, audit led initially to a series of unranked recommendations of the institution concerned,

subsequently categorised into recommendations of 'necessary', 'advisability' or 'desirability'. In 1997, the two processes were brought together under a new agency (QAA) which was set up as a company limited by guarantee with the bodies representing higher education institutions as its legal owners, but with directors nominated by the Funding Councils and a number of independent directors together having an overall majority on its board of directors. Teaching Quality Assessment became Subject Review and Audit became Continuation Audit.

The Continuation Audit was mainly managerial in focus, examining institutional quality management and decision-making processes (i.e. the institution's quality strategy, academic standards, the learning infrastructure and internal and external communications), while Subject Review focused on six aspects of provision: curriculum design, content and organisation, teaching, learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, student support and guidance, learning resources and quality management and enhancement. For both processes, self-evaluation documents played an important part. For Subject Review, each of the six aspects was marked out of a numerical score of 1 – 4 (4 meant the aspect made a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives and where the aims set by the subject provider were fully met; 1 that the aims and/or objectives were not met and there were major shortcomings that had to be rectified). For Continuation Audit, three main categories were created to report the findings to the institution: points for commendation, points for further consideration and points for concern.

Do the Benefits Outweigh the Costs Involved?

By 2001, all institutions of higher education in Britain had undergone Subject Review and Continuation Audit. Over £300 million has been spent by the QAA on the process; however, no serious or systematic attempt has been made to calculate the costs to institutions (chiefly staff time) which external quality evaluation has consumed. In the largest-ever review of teaching, less than 1 per cent of University departments were judged to be failing while almost half of all courses were considered 'excellent', scoring at least 22 or more out of a maximum aggregate mark of 24. The complete results of the teaching quality assessment show that after almost 2,000 visits to university departments since numerical assessment grades were first given out in 1995, just 15 departments were found to be failing – 0.8 of all provision. Only one

department – 0.5 per cent of those inspected – was found to be permanently failing. Excellence was found in 63.7 per cent of 'old' (i.e. pre-1992) universities. The QAA argued that the exercise proved that the state of higher education in the UK is generally very good. Commenting on the findings, Peter Williams, chief executive of the QAA, insisted there was real evidence that the exercise led to an improvement in the quality of teaching. He stated,

> "*There can be very few honest and reflective teachers in higher education who would not admit that the prospect of a TQA forced them to think very carefully about what they were doing. The stakes were very high and it mattered...It is also true, I believe, that the new and more structured – more professional – attention given to the quality of courses and the facilitation of learning since the TQA's introduction has made it possible to teach the ever increasing numbers of students without sacrificing the most basic values and standards which are the bedrock of higher education.*" (*THES, 2000*)

However, as Brown (2000) argues, little serious attempt has been made to calculate the real costs to institutions and whether they are justified by the benefits to justify such claims. Nor has there been a considered analysis of the effectiveness of the whole exercise, or whether it has raised, or even protected, quality and standards.

The results of the exercise certainly appear to show an improvement in standards over time. In the first round of inspections, between 1995 and 1996, when departments were first assessed in each of the six aspects of provision, the average score was 20.06 out of 24. This increased to 20.44 in 1996-98, and peaked at 21.70 in 1998-2000. In the final round, 2000-01, the average grade was 21.12. The proportion of departments deemed to be 'excellent' by Subject Reviewers (22 or more out of 24) also increased significantly, from a quarter in 1995-96, to just over a third in 1996-98, and up to more than half in the 1998-2000 and the final round. In the final round, of 11 separate subjects reviewed, excellence was almost universal in seven subjects. For example in philosophy, the average score per department was 23.31 out of 24, and in Celtic studies it was 22.75.

These findings, however, have led critics to claim the whole TQA exercise was a waste of time and money. They argue that large amounts of public money, £300 million by the QAA alone, have been spent on establishing that the overwhelming majority of higher education provision

is satisfactory and that there is no clear evidence that the quality assessment exercise has led to quality enhancement. There have therefore been calls for an independent cost-benefit analysis to be carried out. Questions have also been raised about the reliability and validity of the judgements made in Subject Reviews because of the absence of any serious mechanism to moderate variations between review teams or between subjects.

Critics, such as Geoffrey Alderman, former pro-vice chancellor for quality at Middlesex University, also question the validity of the exercise and claim that the improvements mainly reflected 'gamesmanship' as institutions gradually learned how to give the reviewers what they wanted (THES, 2000). It became common for staff development units to teach departments how to draft their self-assessment document to make sure they never aspired to any objectives they could not demonstrate they could meet. They also briefed them on what to say during aspect meetings and how to prepare current and former students and employers that the reviewers would meet, thus raising doubts about the validity of the whole process. Defenders of the QAA argue that the introduction of teaching quality assessment has caused considerably more attention to be given to the teaching function within institutions: to talking about teaching and by implication to the actual teaching process. However, some sceptics would argue that the time devoted to quality assessment of teaching has been at the expense of time devoted to the actual teaching process. There have also been countervailing pressures on staff from the Research Assessment Exercise carried out every six years in the UK to access the quality of research of research in universities. Many would argue that the exercise has weakened the importance attached to teaching, particularly in the more elite 'research-led' universities.

One of the clearest findings of the data analysis, assuming that it can be relied upon, is that so-called old, pre-1992, universities are far better at teaching than the former polytechnics, which are themselves much better than college-sector providers of higher education. No new universities appear in the top ten of the 'league tables' that have been compiled on the basis of the numerical scores awarded since 1995. In contrast, every university in the bottom ten of the table is a new university. As well as performing better on average, excellence is overwhelmingly concentrated in old universities. Across the whole exercise since 1995, 63.7 per cent of departments awarded 22 or more out of 24 were in old universities, compared with 41.9 per cent in new universities and 26.8 per cent in colleges. In the 2000-01 round, 85.9 per cent of excellent

grades were given to old universities, compared with 64.7 per cent in new universities and 29.3 per cent in colleges.

In contrast, failures are concentrated in colleges that provide higher education courses. Since 1995, only two old university departments have been deemed to be failing and both passed subsequent reviews. This compares with 11 further education college departments. To many critics, such findings reflect the binary divide which originally existed between universities and polytechnics and which has never gone away in terms of funding. However, the TQA was not supposed to be a simple judgement about an institution's resources. The QAA's initial guidebook on how to conduct subject reviews included a specific reminder that "assessors should be aware that very good teaching and learning can take place in unsuitable conditions". Despite attempts to largely factor out the effect of university funding, it seems that an institution's resources have made a clear contribution to its success. This is supported by the performance of institutions in the one aspect of provision where it is difficult to ignore a department's relative wealth: 'learning resources' which examines library, computer resources, teaching/learning and social accommodation, and technical and administrative support. In the 2000-1 round, 93 per cent of old universities were awarded 4 out of 4 for the quality of their learning resources. This compares with 89.5 per cent in new universities and just 62.9 per cent in colleges.

Lessons From the UK

While the literature points to a significant degree of borrowing by national systems of higher education from others, it is important that borrowed procedures and approaches fit well within the culture of the particular system or institution. As Craft (1994) argues, procedures need to be adopted and adapted if the quality assurance movement is not to be seen as a new form of cultural imperialism as there are considerable differences between countries, not least in their histories, traditions and cultures. However, as Harman (1998) and Brennan and Shah (2000) point out, there is an increasing convergence internationally in terms of government approaches. This is borne out by the head of the QAD acknowledging the agency looked very closely at the work of the QAA (The Star Online, 2002). This suggests there are some important lessons from the UK for Malaysian institutions of higher education as they embark on the process of more systematic quality assurance.

Quality assessment in the UK has had a major impact upon values and power relations in higher education institutions. Quality assessment is seldom an entirely voluntary activity for those who undertake it. Varying degrees of compulsion – from external agencies like the QAA, from university management, from outside events – are usually present. Staff engage in quality assessment because they have to, whatever the enthusiasm and commitment they may bring to the tasks or acquire in the process of carrying them out. Inevitably the question of whether it is worthwhile, whether the time and resources devoted to quality management and assessment could be put to better use in other ways, is raised in most institutions that undertake these processes. Does quality assessment bring benefits that outweigh the costs involved? Does it make an impact and, if so, what? From the analysis above, it seems that the jury is still out on this question. It will be a few years before any objective verdict can be offered on the TQA story. Peter Williams, chief executive of the QAA, admits that the organisation has to dismantle the legacy it has created which has left institutions believing that quality assurance is about meeting arbitrary external demands and not about ensuring the best education for students.

Evidence from the UK (Harman, 1998; Brennan and Shah, 2000, Brown, 2000) suggests the QAA has had a major influence on higher education policies, structures cultures and rewards. In terms of rewards, it has given even greater status to the more elite institutions through enhanced funding, reputation and so on, as there have been special competitions for the funding of educational development projects, with entrance to the competition being dependent on good assessment results (HEFCE, 1997). The system has therefore brought greater rewards and reputation to the older, more elite universities. Such linking of quality assessment to funding is problematic as it involves the state paying more for an already good 'product' and punishing the 'unsuccessful' by reducing funding. Logic would suggest giving more to the least good rather than rewarding the most successful.

Impact through changing policies and structures has mainly been in response to the requirements of external assessment leading to the development of institution-wide quality management policies and procedures, leading to greater centralisation and managerialism. The introduction of institution-wide quality management policies has often led to a corporate approach to institutional management and to greater internal processes of accountability, and to the introduction of line-management in place of collegiate decision-making structures. Such

fundamental changes in institutional decision-making have had a major impact on the academic culture of higher education.

Traditional features of higher education institutions in the UK have included flexibly-grouped academic units, a high degree of professional autonomy for academic staff and highly specialised work roles. Such working practices have helped shape the culture of higher education and how academics feel about themselves, their work and their institution. In other words, academic culture embraces values, attitudes and behaviour that are shared within an academic discipline. Quality assessment can undermine existing academic cultures by weakening group boundaries within higher education and by imposing centralised rules and regulations. The widespread use of student feedback questionnaires and of internal institution-wide quality management arrangements are also likely to weaken specialist disciplinary definitions of good teaching. External quality assessment can therefore strengthen authority at the institutional level by placing emphasis on the exercise of responsibility at the centre of the institution, by scrutinising internal mechanisms of accountability, and by requiring institution-wide policies and effective strategies for their implementation.

In response to such criticism, the QAA argued that external quality assessment at the subject level could strengthen disciplinary and departmental interests within institutions because of the added prestige that a good review can bring to a subject, thereby enhancing its standing and influence. It also argued that because Subject Review was primarily peer review, and peers were primarily subject experts, assessment took place within the culture and values of the discipline so as not to undermine them. However, this was not the complete picture as subject peers were trained to use guidelines and criteria of assessment which gave weight to factors outside of disciplinary concerns and which reinforced the Agency's conception of quality in teaching.

The New UK Quality Framework

The first cycle of assessment in the UK has taken ten years and the QAA has embarked on a new cycle which started in September 2002. The new quality framework is designed to be acceptable to all main stakeholders – the Department for Education and Skills, the Higher Education Funding Council, employers and students, and the institutions themselves and their representative bodies – and to address weaknesses

identified in the earlier quality assurance regimes. The new framework is seen as being more comprehensive, covering not only the quality of learning opportunities (previously covered by Subject Review) and institutional quality management (previously covered by Continuation Audit) but also academic standards covered by subject benchmark statements. The main focus will be on an institution's own internal quality assurance methods and on the accuracy of published information on quality and standards. Institutions will therefore be audited by the QAA every six years to verify that published information on quality and standards of its programmes and awards for students and other stakeholders is detailed, accurate and verifiable, and that it has confidence in an institution's management of its quality assurance. Quality assurance systems will be tested through 'discipline audit trails' undertaken during audits by institutional auditors with general relevant expertise, not specialist subject reviewers. Only suspected poor quality provision will be fully reviewed by a Subject Review being carried out by specialist reviewers in cases where cause for serious concern is identified.

By putting responsibility for assuring quality and standards clearly within institutions, intervention will be in inverse proportion according to the success of the institution in convincing the QAA that it has rigorous systems in place for assuring quality and standards. In other words, the intensity of Academic Reviewers' scrutiny will not be the same for each institution but will vary depending upon the view which the Agency takes of the maturity and reliability of the institution's internal quality processes. There will also be increased opportunities for student involvement through more extensive surveys. The obligations on institutions will involve sound and effective internal reviews with external participants, sound and effective use of external examiners who will receive training from the QAA, honest and full publication of information about quality and standards, and the use of student surveys. Key reference points for audits will be the National Qualifications framework which defines different levels of awards so as to ensure consistent use of qualification titles (e.g certificates, Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral degrees), subject benchmarks which state what the relevant academic communities consider to be valid frames of reference within which an honour degree in a discipline should be offered, and codes of practice (e.g. for collaborative provision, students with disabilities, student assessment, equal opportunities). The audit process will also consider how institutions are assuring and enhancing the quality of their teaching staff through staff development programmes and appraisal.

The QAA claims that the new UK Quality Framework answers many of the criticisms levelled at earlier systems of quality assurance in terms of coverage and focus, the balance between the different aspects of quality assurance (accountability and enhancement), and within the accountability aspect, the balance between reliance on external and internal processes, cost effectiveness and consistency with other policies for higher education. It is argued that the new framework has achieved a much more comprehensive focus by bringing together Subject Review and Continuation Audit, as well as focusing on academic standards. Similarly it is argued that a better balance between accountability and enhancement has been achieved by placing a greater emphasis on institutional quality assurance systems rather than external audit.

In terms of cost effectiveness, it is anticipated that there will be a net reduction in the average total number of reviewer days spent in each institution per cycle, compared with the number of days spent by assessors and auditors under the old system. Institutions will also be able to negotiate with the Agency the timing and aggregation of Subject Reviews, enabling such reviews to be aligned with internal review, revalidation and professional body accreditation timetables. This in turn will eliminate duplication of efforts in preparing for different reviews, at different times, that draw upon largely common evidence.

In judging the effectiveness of the new framework, it needs to be borne in mind that it is still early days with regard its implementation. That is why any judgements or conclusions about it must remain provisional at this stage. Despite the QAA's reassurances, sceptics argue that the overall thrust of the new framework is towards accountability to third party funders and users rather than promoting enhancement that is likely to have the greatest payoff in terms of lasting improvements. There are also concerns regarding the sheer amount of effort which institutions will need to make to gear themselves and their internal processes up for the new regime: programme specifications for every course, detailed outcomes for every award, etc. There will also be the cost of keeping these up to date. Another major concern is that no estimates of the likely costs to institutions have been made though it has been estimated that the total cost of each subject review event at an institution will be in the region of £250,000 (Brown, 2000).

Nor has the Agency satisfied critics who point to the lack of reliability and validity in the whole process because of the absence of any serious mechanism to moderate variations in judgements between review teams, making the quality of the information provided very questionable. Critics

point out that it is difficult to have comparable and defensible outcomes when reviewer input is relatively constant and that it will be even more difficult under a system of varying intensity according to the degree of confidence the Agency has in an institution's quality assurance systems. Brown (2000) argues that variability of scrutiny cannot logically support consistency and reliability of judgements or valid, comparable information for stakeholders, especially students. Given the increasing diversity of higher education, particularly with the government aiming to have 50 per cent of the 18 – 21 age group in some form of higher education by the end of the decade, the question remains as to the extent to which a single framework can adequately reflect the differing missions, circumstances and resources of the plethora of institutions which will by then be offering higher education to UK students. The provision will include not only publicly funded universities and colleges but also professional bodies, companies offering in-house programmes, and all kinds of 'with profit' providers, some based overseas and offering education and training on-line across national frontiers. To its critics, the new quality framework appears to be not only insular but also backward looking.

Conclusions and Implications

It has been argued that quality assessment is controversial because it affects the distribution of power within higher education and within institutions. National quality bodies like the QAD will have to strike some kind of balance between representation of the interests of institutional management, the academic profession more widely, non-academic interests and the agents of the state. The achieved balance will affect how various interest groups react to its work. Balancing the two main elements of quality assessment, accountability and enhancement, will be difficult because they appeal to different forms of motivation and in practice are very difficult to combine within a single framework (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Brown, 2000). Working out the tensions between different value systems and interests groups, and achieving legitimacy for its processes and outcomes, will be a major challenge facing the QAD.

Quality assessment will also affect the balance of power within institutions, often strengthening institutional management by providing it with information on which to base decisions and an external 'threat' to

justify the need to take those decisions. However, effective peer review can strengthen the authority of the subject communities and lessen the likelihood of institutional management being able to achieve ends that run counter to those judgements. Quality assessment can therefore be used in attack or defence depending on the context in which it operates and the interests it serves. When used for attack, it is a tool available to the state and to institutional managers with which to control, and perhaps to transform, higher education. In defence, it can be used by academic and subject groups to help protect the maintenance of their values and, where 'successful', to claim status and associated rewards that might otherwise be unavailable. Policies on quality assessment at both national and institutional level will become important arenas for the working out of tensions between different values and interests in the future shaping of higher education in Malaysia. On the basis of the evidence presented in this paper, getting the balance right between accountability and enhancement, and between reliance on external and internal processes, will be crucial. There will also be a need to show the quality assessment process provides value for money and that it generates reliable and valid evidence on the quality of higher education in Malaysia.

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