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HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE: CURRENT PRACTICE IN GREAT BRITAIN

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The article deals with an international problem of quality assurance in higher education. Despite the enormous growth in national quality assurance processes in Great Britain, serious doubts remain about their effectiveness in achieving lasting quality improvement. The paper suggests that the quality of students' experience of higher education can more effectively be improved by combining educational development with quality assurance to create a more positive, not punitive approach. The concept of "quality development" is explained and mechanisms of this approach are described.

Introduction

The establishment of democracy in Ukraine as well as in all Central and Eastern European countries released tremendous energies and affected all walks of life, including higher education. The time frame coincided with such global trends in higher education as the sharp increase in the demand for study places, the emergence of a large variety and flexibility of study programmes and schemes, the entry of information technology into the market for educational provision, the increasing interest in quality assurance and government demands for accountability in the use of public monies, and calls for stakeholder protection.

Quality assurance is a central thrust in the process of recent changes in European higher education. To understand and solve the problem different movements were set in Europe through various European Union programmes (*e.g.*, TEMPUS, SOCRATES-ERASMUS, PHARE and NARIC), the Council of Europe, and UNESCO/CEPES initiatives (*e.g.*, the Legislative Reform Programme, ENIC) and others. The Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Prague Communiqué (2001) are the most far-reaching of all European initiatives, which have set into motion various movements to design the future of European higher education [1].

The Central and Eastern European countries have had to face the challenge of taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the various Western European models of quality control in higher education. They can not only to adapt these mechanisms to their own historical, political, cultural, and social environments, but also to establish comparable ones. The main reasons cited include the necessity to re-evaluate the curricula, to rid them of politically distorted content; and the urgency to modernize programme content and approach as well as to introduce more flexible programme structures. So, the experience of countries all over the world is of the great interest to Ukraine as one of the Central and Eastern European countries.

The purpose of quality assurance

Quality in higher education is an international issue through academic, political, and commercial developments associated with globalization, such as the rise of market forces in tertiary education and the emergence of a global market for skilled professionals and graduates. In some countries, the traditional providers of higher education are facing competition from transnational education providers as well as from the emergence of local commercial providers. Through the internationalization of higher education national systems, qualifications and individual higher education institutions have become exposed to the wider world. This exposure has stimulated a demand for better information and transparency about quality and standards in order to attract and retain students and staff, both national and international students, and to secure the recognition of qualifications.

In the rapidly changing environment of higher education, the maintenance of high quality and standards in education has become a major concern for higher education institutions and governments; thus, the demand for explicit quality evaluation and assurance processes has increased. The result has been the introduction of national quality assurance systems into many countries and the planned introduction of such systems into other countries.

Over the last two decades, a number of factors have combined to challenge traditional views about quality in higher education and how it is assured. The challenges facing higher education worldwide include the following:

– the need to assure quality and standards against a background of substantially increased participation – a process often referred to as the so called “massification” of higher education. This process accelerated throughout the latter part of the XX Century as many countries began to consider that their economic and social future was dependent, in part, on the availability of quality higher education for the majority of the population rather than for small elite. However, expansion has not always been well planned or controlled;

- the expansion in student numbers with either constant or declining (public) funding resulting in a lower unit of resource per student. This position has been compounded by the inefficient use of available resources. Examples of inefficiencies include overly high staff-student ratios, programme duplication in many small institutions/units with high unit costs, and under-utilized facilities. Such inefficiencies divert resources from such objectives as quality and access;
- increased demand for accountability in higher education institutions as a result of deregulation and the granting of increased autonomy in regard to such matters as curriculum design, the selection of students, and the appointment of staff. However, increased autonomy has not always been accompanied either by financial authority or by improved institutional management and strategic planning capabilities;
- the meeting of new expectations in terms of the “employability” of graduates in the knowledge society;
- the addressing of demands from a variety of stakeholders for increased and improved information about programmes and institutions and about the skills, competencies, and aptitudes which graduates possess;
- the contribution to the achievement of social and political agendas such as access, inclusion, and equity;
- the appearance of new providers of tertiary education, sometimes in competition with traditional public higher education, and new modes of provision, such as on-line learning, resulting from the information and communication technology revolution [2, p. 67–83].

Concepts of and approaches to “quality”

There are many different understandings of the term “quality” often reflecting the interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education. Thus, “quality” is a multidimensional and often a subjective concept.

Conceptions of “quality” were categorized by various scientists and were elaborated in the manual *Quality Assurance and Accreditation: Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions*. The glossary is the result of a UNESCO-CEPES initiative undertaken for the particular occasion of the Invitational Roundtable on “Indicators for Institutional and Programme Accreditation in Higher Education/Tertiary Education” (Bucharest, Romania, 3–8 April 2003), that was organized in the framework of the UNESCO-CEPES project on *Strategic Indicators for Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century*.

The main approaches are the following.

Quality as excellence. This definition is considered to be the traditional academic view that holds as its goal to be the best.

Quality as “zero errors”. The idea of “zero errors” is defined most easily in mass industry in which product specifications can be established in detail, and standardized measurements of uniform products can show conformity to them. As the “products” of higher education, the graduates, are not expected to be identical, this view is not always considered to be applicable to higher education.

Quality as “fitness for purpose”. This view requires that the product or service meet a customer’s needs, requirements, or desires. Learners (students) and prospective learners, those who fund higher education, the academic community, government, and society at large are to a greater or lesser extent all clients or users of higher education but may have very different views of both “purpose” and “fitness”.

Quality as transformation. This concept focuses firmly on the learners: the better the higher education institution, the more it achieves the goal of empowering students with specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes which enable them to live and work in the knowledge society. This notion of quality may be particularly appropriate when there have been significant changes in the profile of learners, for example, when changes in society or politics have enhanced access to higher education for large numbers of disadvantaged learners. While this notion is popular, it may be difficult to measure quality as transformation in terms of intellectual capital.

Quality as threshold. Defining a threshold for quality means setting certain norms and criteria. Any programme, department, or institution, which reaches these norms and criteria, is deemed to be of quality. The advantage of setting a threshold is that it is objective and certifiable. However, there are arguments that setting a threshold creates uniformity across the higher education system. This argument might well apply if institutions adopt a “compliance” mentality and only do what is sufficient to satisfy the minimum. There are significant disadvantages to this concept, especially when the criteria and standards are based on quantitative “input” factors enshrined in law. It cannot readily be adapted to changing circumstances or to stimulate change and innovation. Nevertheless, in many European higher education systems, a “minimum standards” variant has been used if only as a starting point in the quest for quality.

Quality as value for money. The notion of accountability is central to this definition of quality with accountability being based on the need for restraint in public expenditure.

Quality as enhancement or improvement. This concept emphasizes the pursuit of continuous improvement and is predicated on the notion that achieving quality is central to the academic ethos and that it is academics themselves who know best what quality is at any point in time. Disadvantages of this concept are that it is difficult to “measure” improvement and that the evidence of improvement may not be easily discernible to the outside world [3, p. 46–52].

Some of these concepts of quality still hold true especially when explicit quality assurance is being developed and introduced for the first time either at system or at institutional level. But, notions of quality are evolving or merging, either as the result of the changing context in which higher education institutions is operating in some countries, or as a result of growing expertise within higher education systems and institutions in devising their own concepts of quality and models of evaluation and quality management. Mismatches between the requirements of the external quality assurance agency and institutional approaches to quality can be a cause of tension in relations. Whatever concept of quality is adopted by a national system, the evaluation procedures introduced by the external evaluation agency must match it. The same principle applies at institutional level as well, but all institutions within a system need not adopt the same approach to quality in any one system. However, twenty years of operational expertise in quality assurance in higher education has not led to a consensus on how the concept of quality should be defined, rather the opposite [4, p. 24].

Quality management and the impact on Higher Education Institutions

There has been an enormous growth in quality assurance processes over the last 10 years in higher education in Great Britain. This growth has been primarily generated by the demands of national agencies. External pressures have required institutions to develop elaborate and comprehensive internal procedures to audit the practice of academic and central departments. In many universities the issue is compounded by organizational divisions. Typically, there are those charged with developmental change in universities and those responsible for ensuring the demands that quality assurance are addressed.

These functions are typically located in separate offices, sometimes known as “educational development” or “learning and teaching” centres and quality assurance or “standards” offices. Because they also have competing improvement agendas based on often opposing values, the relationship between educational development and quality assurance is a complex one. The differences between these values are at the heart of the tensions occurring between them.

This tension will be explored and a proposal made for a quality development model that suggests ways of overcoming the tensions and enabling quality assurance and educational development to work in partnership with each other to achieve some common goals.

There are undoubtedly ways in which the kinds of improvements to learning and teaching with which educational development is centrally concerned will be, and should be, reflected in the criteria by which quality is assessed in higher education. Similarly, there are quality assurance mechanisms that can and should be part of an integrated process for improving the student’s learning experience. In this paper, we review the quality agenda in higher education in Great Britain and its impact on current practice. A quality development model is proposed and illustrated by a number of examples of how it can work in practice.

In recent years there has been increasing demands by so-called ‘stakeholders’ in higher education for institutions to be made more accountable. The demands have come primarily from governments who argue that the public investment in higher education justifies closer scrutiny of the outcomes achieved by publicly funded institutions and from students who expect to receive good quality teaching and sufficient learning resources to meet their needs. Such demands are also driven by fears that the expansion of higher education is threatening quality.

In response to these questions of quality assurance in Britain, there has been a considerable growth of quality management processes both internally, normally through a “quality” or “standards” office within institutions, and externally through, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [5].

The external processes have included departmental subject review, institutional audit, benchmarking, programme specification and performance indicators. External quality assessment in British higher education is currently conducted through two processes carried out by the QAA: “subject review” and “institutional audit”. Subject review involves academic peers reviewing six aspects of provision: curriculum design, teaching learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, learning support, learning resources and quality management and enhancement. The process normally involves a 4-day visit during which teaching is observed, student work is examined and documentation, of both the subject area and institutional quality assurance practices, is reviewed. The result is a numerical score for each aspect of provision on a 4-point scale. A report of the outcomes of each institutional sub-

ject review is published and made available for public scrutiny.

Nowadays the QAA is introducing further quality mechanisms into the subject review process.

These include: subject specific “benchmark statements” of the expected learning outcomes for any honors graduate within subject areas (41 subjects have been identified for this purpose), “programme specifications” that will require every programme of study to provide a statement of its learning outcomes, and a “national qualifications framework” to standardize qualifications and degree awards across the sector.

Institutional audit is separately undertaken by a team of assessors who attempt to check the higher education institution’s “analytical account” of its practices, particularly the achievement and maintenance of standards against the evidence provided through face-to-face meetings with teams of staff and through review of all relevant documentation.

The judgment arrived at by the team is for the institution as a whole, not for a specific subject.

Reports on the audit visits are also published for the benefit of public scrutiny and accountability [4, p. 140].

The growth of the “quality industry” has generated a lively debate about what constitutes “quality assurance” and has impacted enormously on many scientists (R. Ellis, L. Harvey, D. Green, M. Trow, M. Rustin). It is not surprising, therefore, that it has come under intense scrutiny and criticism. The claims against current quality management systems in higher education may be summarized as follows:

- the emphasis on documenting evidence is a time-consuming distraction from the real business of teaching and research;
- the measures utilized in making judgments about quality bear little relation to what is important in academic institutions. As a result, the judgments (in particular numerical scores) have little value, validity or reliability;
- quality processes impose a methodology that is based on assumptions that are not open to challenge or debate and are to that extent antithetical to the academic culture;
- the imposition of quality management derives from a lack of trust by the public, government and institutional managers that is damaging to the ethos of the university. Collegiality is being lost and replaced by excessive bureaucracy and “proceduralism”, resulting in reduced staff morale;
- there is little evidence that forcing conformity to quality procedures brings about any fundamental changes that improve the students’ experience of higher education. Some would argue that the overall

impact on students of intrusive quality procedures has been negative [6].

Quality development: a new concept for Higher Education

The above mentioned critical issues proved that there is the need for a quality system that not only performs a regulatory function but one that functions to improve the quality of the educational experience, one that provides a developmental function as well. Many educational developers recognize the dilemma outlined above. This dilemma is also the cause of some tension in institutions between the offices responsible for quality assurance and educational development. Higher education institutions frequently expect Educational Development Offices or Centres to help subjects prepare for the QAA visits. This has brought quality and educational development into increased contact with each other and required greater collaboration between the two. The working agenda of each of these areas has often been at odds because quality assurance focuses on quality assessment and educational development focuses on quality enhancement. This shift in emphasis is linked to what is called a **quality development process** [7, p. 10].

The quality development approach is essentially an integrated educational development model that incorporates the enhancement of learning and teaching with the quality and standards monitoring processes in the university. The work of educational development in this model involves initiating and managing three major areas of work academic development, learning development and quality development. In this model, the range of activities of the educational development office would create what might be called a “quality loop”. It takes the development, implementation and evaluation of the educational provision full circle by informing the process of curriculum development and validation with knowledge of current pedagogical theory and practice. It would also provide the necessary professional development for teaching staff on teaching/learning strategies that would be most effective in meeting the educational aims and objectives of the curriculum developed.

An integrated educational development model creates the links between curriculum development and quality assurance by creating a collegial environment within which to design curriculum that provides advice and guidance on assuring the quality of the curriculum developed. In this way a positive and non-punitive, professional approach can be taken when the official approval occurs. Additionally, these processes can enhance support for students’ learning development needs as well. Too often, the approval of courses has focused on curriculum con-

tent without being informed by consideration of how students' learning skills are developed. By linking learning development with academic development and quality development, the process can take into account the expertise of each area and produce a more useful result, ensuring that the students are more sufficiently supported to achieve the very best results in their studies.

This integrated approach has a number of benefits for the institution, staff and most importantly students. It begins by addressing the tensions between quality assurance and educational development by providing wide-ranging support for teaching departments to enhance the educational experience of students. It also creates the opportunity for dialogue between quality assurance staff and educational developers around the internal and external quality assessment policies and procedures [8, p. 21].

Conclusion

English scientists and practitioners deeply convinced that it is only when students and staff are able to enquire into their practices through self-investigation and discussion, in an ethos that is not potentially punitive, critical issues in learning and teaching can be fully acknowledged and addressed. Previously, quality assurance with its emphasis on measurement, external accountability and regulatory control can identify problems and possibly shame institutions of higher education into taking some actions to comply with the regulatory framework, but it cannot in itself bring improvements.

New model of quality assurance suggests the ways of using peer review of teaching, student evaluations, curriculum development and analysis of learning support that will ultimately bring greater benefits to students and achieve quality improvement. This is

a model that allows for continuous quality improvements which effectively replaces a shame and blames approach with a name and claim ownership approach to quality development. This is proposed as a positive way forward for institutions, the higher education sector, and all the stakeholders for whom a quality higher education system is important.

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Н.М. Авшенюк

Забезпечення якості вищої освіти: сучасний англійський досвід

Розглянуто міжнародну проблему забезпечення якості вищої освіти в умовах сучасного стрімко змінного суспільства. Останніми роками у Великій Британії відбувається значне розгортання процесу забезпечення якості вищої освіти. Попри очевидне поліпшення якості освіти у вищих навчальних закладах країни, виникають сумніви щодо тривалого збереження рівня досягнутих результатів. Обґрунтовано новий для англійської академічної практики підхід до розв'язання цієї проблеми, який дістав назву „процес удосконалення якості”. Він розглядається науковцями і викладачами Великої Британії як процес поєднання заходів, спрямованих на удосконалення освіти і забезпечення її якості.

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Обеспечение качества высшего образования: современный английский опыт

Рассмотрена международная проблема обеспечения качества высшего образования в условиях стремительно изменяющегося мира. В последние годы в Великобритании происходит существенное развитие процесса обеспечения качества высшего образования. Несмотря на очевидное улучшение качества образования в высших учебных заведениях страны, возникают сомнения относительно сохранения уровня достигнутых результатов. Обоснован новый для английской академической практики подход к решению этой проблемы, получивший название «процесс усовершенствования качества». Он рассматривается учеными и преподавателями Велико-

британии как процесс объединения мероприятий, направленных на усовершенствование образования и обеспечения его качества.