

Quality assurance in higher education as a political process

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The procedures commonly employed for quality assurance in higher education are designed as if the endeavour were a technical process, whereas it may be more useful to view it as a political process. For example, quality assurance requires making choices among competing conceptions of quality, and in so doing privileges some interests over others. Moreover, some stakeholders tend to be given a greater voice than others in the design and implementation of quality assurance. The author concludes that rather than denying the political nature of quality assurance, it would be better to accept Morley's claim that quality assurance is "a socially constructed domain of power", and design procedures for it in a way that is appropriate for a political process. It is suggested that employing the "responsive model" of evaluation could make quality assurance more effective in improving educational quality. In the responsive model, evaluation is deemed to be a collaborative process that starts with the claims, concerns and issues put forth by all stakeholders.

Assurance qualité de l'enseignement secondaire évaluée en tant que processus politique

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Les méthodes généralement utilisées pour évaluer l'assurance qualité de l'enseignement secondaire s'apparentent plus à un processus technique, alors qu'il serait plus bénéfique d'analyser cette question d'un point de vue politique. Par exemple, l'assurance qualité implique de faire des choix parmi les diverses conceptions existantes du mot qualité et, ce faisant, elle privilégie certains intérêts plutôt que d'autres. En outre, certaines parties prenantes ont plus d'influence que d'autres au niveau de la conception et de la mise en œuvre de l'assurance qualité. L'auteur en conclut qu'au lieu de renier la nature politique de l'assurance qualité, il serait préférable d'accepter la thèse exposée par Morley selon laquelle l'assurance qualité est « un domaine de pouvoir construit sur un modèle social », et de mettre en place à cet égard des procédures conformes à un processus politique. Il est suggéré que l'utilisation du « modèle sensible » pourrait rendre l'assurance qualité plus efficace, notamment en termes d'amélioration de la qualité de l'enseignement. Dans le cadre du modèle sensible, l'évaluation est perçue comme un processus de collaboration avant tout basé sur les réclamations, les préoccupations et les problèmes mis en avant par l'ensemble des parties concernées.

Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education has become a major phenomenon worldwide. For example, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), which started in 1991 with eight members, now has more than two hundred members (International Network, 2010). Not only has quality assurance become widespread, but its impacts can be significant. As a consequence of the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, the highest rated department received four times the funding of the lowest rated department for the same volume of research (Morley, 2003, p. 22). As quality assurance has become more pervasive and influential, there have been reports of faculty resistance to quality assurance processes in some countries (Harley, 2002; Morley, 2003; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006). As of yet, however, there has been relatively little critical analysis of the foundations and impacts of quality assurance in higher education, including the way that these processes privilege some interests over others. Harvey and Newton note that there has been “a reluctance in higher education as a discipline to critique the ideology of quality evaluation” (Harvey and Newton, 2004, p. 156).

In this article, I explore one fundamental question about quality assurance in higher education (hereinafter referred to as QA): is QA a technical process or a political process? In formulating this question, I use the term “political” in the way that it is typically explained in political science textbooks. For example, according to Danziger, politics is “the exercise of power”; “the public allocation of things that are valued”; “the resolution of conflict”; and “the competition among individuals and groups pursuing their interests” (Danziger, 1994, p. 5). Thus, a process could be described as political if it displays some or all these characteristics of politics. A cursory familiarity with quality assurance processes suggests the presence of these characteristics.

Quality assurance agencies often have the formal or effective power to confer or deny the authority that is necessary for an academic programme to be offered or to be successful, and in the course of exercising that power they can practically dictate how the programme is to be designed. The decisions of quality assurance agencies may have a great influence on the allocation of resources among institutions and programmes, as in the example of the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom noted earlier. The element of Danziger’s definition of politics that is most likely to escape notice

is the resolution of conflict. Frequently QA processes are designed in such a way as to deny the existence of, or to suppress, conflict rather than to provide a mechanism for its resolution.

I have deliberately worded the question that is the focus of this article in the most provocative way by casting it in “either-or” terms. In fact, rarely if ever is a QA process likely to be purely technical or purely political. Rather, QA processes can be viewed on a continuum in regard to the relative prominence of technical and political dimensions. The location on this continuum is likely to vary considerably depending upon the nature of the activity being assessed, the context of the assessment, and the way that the assessment process is structured. The assessment of activities for which there is a consensus on the specific learning outcomes and how to measure them may be regarded as a primarily technical process. On the other hand, the assessment of activities for which there are wide differences of opinion regarding what the goals should be and how to measure success is likely to have a substantial political dimension.

The notion that quality assurance in higher education is at least in part a political activity is not new. Harvey and Newton observed that quality evaluation is not “a neutral measuring process”, but rather, it is “imbued with politics” (Harvey and Newton, 2004, p. 156). While a few other observers, such as Morley (2003), also have called attention to the political nature of QA, most of the literature about QA concentrates on the technical aspects of the process and by implication treats QA as if it were a purely technical process. This article is an attempt to add to the discussion of the political nature of QA by examining in some detail the factors that contribute to that political nature and by addressing the implications for the practice of QA.

Given the world-wide scale of QA, it is impossible to generalise across all the mechanisms and processes. In this article, I give particular attention to QA practices in Canada, and more particularly in Ontario where I have served on the board of one agency and have studied the operation of another. In addition to Canada, I cite examples and research findings from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. I employ the methodology of critical analysis as Birnbaum (1983) defined that term. Drawing upon my own experience and the experience, observations and findings of others reported in the literature on QA, I have attempted to identify patterns and themes pertaining to the political nature of QA and its implications for practice.

The body of this article is divided into three sections, followed by a brief conclusion. The first section explains what is meant by the term quality assurance in higher education and briefly describes the arrangements for quality assurance in Canadian higher education. The second and longest section elaborates on what it means for QA processes to be political and discusses three factors that may contribute to the political nature of QA. The

third section begins by noting that the typical QA process looks as if it had been designed to solve a technical problem and neglects the political dimension of QA. Drawing upon the literature in the field of evaluation, the article then outlines the characteristics of a different approach to QA that is more appropriate to the political dimension of the project and could make quality assurance more effective in improving educational quality.

Quality assurance in Canadian higher education

Quality assurance is a term that refers to the monitoring, evaluation or review of higher education in order to establish stakeholder confidence that it fulfils expectations or meets minimum requirements (Martin and Stella, 2007, p. 34). The object of QA may be a programme or an entire institution. Internal QA occurs when an institution reviews itself or some of its own programmes. External QA is conducted by an external agency, usually either a government-related agency or an association of institutions, programmes, or relevant occupational groups. The focus of this article is external QA, and unless otherwise noted, the abbreviation QA will be used to refer to just this.

The most common forms of quality assurance are quality assessment, quality audit, and accreditation. In quality assessment, the external agency directs the process and is responsible for the evaluation of quality. In the quality audit approach, the external agency does not actually evaluate institutional or programme quality, but confines itself to evaluating the procedures and criteria that the institution or academic unit uses and the methods by which those who are responsible for a programme assure themselves of its quality. While the quality audit approach has the potential to give more autonomy to institutions in making judgments about quality than the quality assessment approach, much depends upon how prescriptive the audit requirements are. For example, if these include precise standards for educational processes, and specify the particular data that the institution must use in making its “own” quality assessments, then the external agency may exert considerable influence on the shape and outcomes of “internal” quality reviews.

Accreditation is a variant of quality assessment in which an external, non-governmental body determines whether an institution or programme meets pre-determined minimum quality standards. The main distinction between accreditation and quality assessment is that the former is concerned only with whether an institution or programme meets minimum standards, whereas the latter involves making “graded judgments about academic quality levels” (Dill *et al.*, 1996, p. 21).

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of QA in Canadian higher education is the absence of any national system of institutional quality assessment or accreditation. Quality assurance systems in Canadian higher education operate

mainly at the provincial or regional level and focus primarily on programmes rather than institutions. The main exceptions to these generalisations involve a relatively small number of national or North America-wide systems for accreditation of professional programmes or of highly specialised private post-secondary institutions such as bible colleges.

Three of Canada's ten provinces – Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario – have established their own quality assurance bodies and three other provinces – New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia – have jointly established an agency, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission. The Commission, among other functions, serves the QA needs of the three partner provinces (Leyton-Brown, 2005). One of the responsibilities common to these agencies is to conduct quality assessments for all proposed new degree programmes of private post-secondary institutions and of institutions whose home base is outside the province in which the programme is to be offered. Provincial governments consider these quality assessments when deciding whether to allow the applicant institutions to offer the degree programmes in their province. If approval is granted, these agencies do periodic quality assessments of the programmes on a continuing basis. Although an institutional review is part of the application process, all approvals from the government are programme-specific.

Except in Ontario, another responsibility of the agencies just described is to conduct assessments of the academic content and quality of all new programmes proposed by the public universities, which comprise the vast majority of universities in Canada. In Ontario, the government-established QA agency, the Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board, has no role in QA for the public universities that have statutory authority to award degrees. These institutions have developed their own collective, self-regulatory system for quality assurance (Monahan, 2004). One component of this system, which Leyton-Brown describes as “the outstanding example of academic self-regulation at the programme level in Canada” is the appraisal process of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (Leyton-Brown, 2005, p. 235). This council conducts appraisals of all proposed new graduate programmes of the public universities, and the member universities have agreed that they will not offer a new graduate programme that does not get a satisfactory quality rating. Subsequently all graduate programmes are reappraised on a seven-year cycle.

For university undergraduate programmes in Ontario, there is an audit process in which an agency established by the public universities assesses the QA procedures of the individual institutions. Following a comprehensive review of the QA system for graduate programmes in Ontario universities, a 2007 report recommended a shift from the assessment approach to the audit approach and the creation of a unified framework for QA of graduate and undergraduate programmes (Van Loon, 2007). That recommendation has been

accepted by the parties concerned, and efforts are now under way to move to a consolidated quality audit system for Ontario's public universities. A quality audit system for Ontario's colleges was recently developed jointly by the association of colleges and the government ministry that regulates the colleges. Quality audit systems for ongoing programmes in provincial university sectors now exist as well in Quebec and in the provinces that are party to the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Council.

The political nature of quality assurance in higher education

There are three factors in particular that contribute to the political nature of QA in higher education. These are the differences of opinion among stakeholders as to what constitutes quality in higher education; the pressures toward conformity within academe; and imbalance of influence among different stakeholders in QA.

Differences of opinion as to what constitutes quality in higher education

There is no widely accepted definition of quality in higher education. Attempts to define quality have followed two main approaches, one dealing with philosophical concepts, the other focused on tangible phenomena thought to reflect quality. An example of the former is the categorisation of "conceptualisations" of quality offered by Harvey and Green (1993). Harvey and Green suggest that these conceptualisations can be grouped into five "discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality" (Harvey and Green, 1993, p. 11). These ways are described as exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative. The alternative approach is typified by the classification of "conceptions" of quality suggested by Astin (1980). Astin offers five conceptions of quality: mystical, reputational, resources, outcomes and value-added. The latter four conceptions relate to phenomena that are in principle measurable, and in fact measures for all four exist. The mystical conception differs from the others in that it reflects the view that quality simply cannot be measured because the activities of higher education are too complex, variable and subtle. Whereas some might regard the four measurable groups of phenomena in Astin's typology as surrogates for quality, the fact that Astin presents them as "conceptions" of quality illustrates the lack of consensus not just on a specific definition of quality, but as to what constitutes a definition. At issue is whether it is helpful start the quest for a definition of quality in higher education with abstract philosophical principles or proceed directly to what Harvey and Green refer to as "criteria that reflect common-sense aspects of quality" (Harvey and Green, p. 29). While Harvey and Green express a preference for the former approach, they acknowledge that some prefer the latter.

Whether we regard the types of categories that Astin proposed as truly consisting of different conceptions of quality or as Harvey and Green would view them, sets of criteria that reflect common-sense aspects of quality, these are the kind of descriptors of quality that feature prominently in real world debates about quality. Harvey and Green note that different criteria for judging quality are seized upon by different interest groups on the basis of which best serve the interests of their group, and Astin makes a similar observation regarding his conceptions of quality. In like vein, Martin and Stella concluded that “the concept of quality is much disputed in higher education and often used by stakeholders to legitimise their specific vision or interests” (Martin and Stella, 2007, p. 30).

Outside the United States, the QA movement in higher education is a relatively recent phenomenon. Interest in QA developed earlier in the United States than in most other countries because of the historically limited governmental control over higher education in many states, and thus the ease with which new degree-granting institutions, particularly privately owned and controlled ones, could be established. The early emphasis in QA in the United States was on trying to prevent fly-by-night promoters of higher education from exploiting students. In countries such as Canada, where government approval was necessary for institutions to offer degree programmes, and governments funded those institutions, it was assumed that the institutions that conducted degree programmes were responsible ones with sufficient resources to offer credible programmes (Harris, 1976). If governments thought at all about the quality of higher education – and there is not much indication that this was of concern to governments in much of the world prior to the 1970s – they thought this job could be left to the universities themselves.

The big change in QA that occurred in the last third of the twentieth century in Canada and many other countries was from confining concern about quality to small, new, unknown and undercapitalised institutions to extending that concern to whole publicly funded systems of higher education that included well known, large and seemingly well-resourced institutions (Clark *et al.*, 2009). Several factors were responsible for the new interest that governments had in the quality of the central institutions in higher education systems rather than in just the peripheral elements of those systems.

The two most important factors contributing to the QA movement that began around the 1970s, though the precise date varies among jurisdictions, were economic. One related to the large and growing amounts of public expenditures that were going to higher education as a result of the enrolment expansion that got under way in the last third of the twentieth century. The other important factor, which along with demography provided the impetus for the enrolment expansion, was the growing belief that more and better higher education was essential for economic growth. If governments were

going to spend large sums of money on an enterprise that was deemed critical to national and regional economic growth and security, then it was natural for governments to take pains to ensure that the money was being spent effectively in service of its goals.

The idea that universities were increasingly going to be held accountable for their use of public funds was not lost upon higher education leaders (Corry, 1970). Educators in many jurisdictions realised that if they did not implement QA regimes on their own, governments would likely do it for them. Also, government-imposed QA regimes might not be as respectful of academic values as academics themselves could be if they were in charge. In particular, by establishing QA processes themselves, higher education leaders could **define quality in a way that best served their interests**. And what served their interests best was to define quality primarily in terms of resources, *i.e.* student-faculty ratio, average class size, expenditure per student, laboratory space, library holdings, etc. As Astin noted, “When educators feel the need to develop operational measures of institutional quality, they typically equate quality with an institution’s educational resources” (Astin, 1980, p. 2). This tendency was evident in the annual briefs submitted to the government by the Council of Ontario Universities during the 1980s that purported to show the harmful effects of government funding policy on academic quality. In making this connection, quality was depicted exclusively in terms of resources (Skolnik, 1986).

As quality assurance in higher education developed and evolved, the ideas of quality that had the greatest influence and impact until practically the end of the twentieth century were those that defined quality in terms of resources, faculty research productivity, admissions selectivity and conformity to conventional educational practices and requirements. The explanation for the historic dominance of definitions of quality based upon these factors, especially resources, is that for quite some time academic leaders controlled QA, either because they were the ones to initiate it, or because even when governments promoted the establishment of QA systems, they deferred to academic leaders in the design of those systems.

One of the attractions of the resources conception of quality for educational leaders is that it makes quality a function of how much revenue the institution has. Thus, a QA process which embraces the resources conceptualisation of quality provides constant pressure on government to increase its financial support of public universities.

For the same reasons that higher education leaders like the resources view of quality, it is anathema to governments. Governments tend to prefer the learning outcomes conceptualisation of quality. Its appeal lies in the fact that it addresses the issue that is of paramount interest to parents and the

public: whether “students will receive a standard of education that provides both the technical knowledge required for practice and the general knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society” (Massaro, 2010). Educators tend not to like the learning outcomes view of quality, because they don’t want to be held accountable for outcomes over which they feel that they have, at best, quite limited control.

In part, the story of the politics of QA over the past four decades in Canada and some other countries can be told in terms of the growing interest of the public and the government in the learning outcomes view of quality relative to the resources and other input and process-oriented views which had been dominant previously. In the seventies and eighties in some jurisdictions, higher education leaders were able to satisfy government concerns for accountability merely by establishing mechanisms of quality assurance. Governments initially didn’t concern themselves with how quality was defined, only that some form of QA was in place. More recently though, they have taken an interest in how quality is defined and, in particular, the weight given to outcomes. In the 1990s governments in some Canadian provinces began to require post-secondary institutions to publicly report their performance in regard to some indicators that reflected outcomes, such as employment and graduation rates, and tied a portion of institutional funding to such indicators. In the United States this change in thinking was reflected in the recommendation by a 2006 Commission appointed by the Secretary of Education, that regional accreditation agencies should give learning outcomes the central place in accreditation reviews and give less attention to resources and educational processes (Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Education, 2006, p. 25). Not surprisingly, the recommendation to give less weight to what academics have traditionally regarded as the appropriate indicators of quality aroused a strident reaction from some accreditation agencies.

Besides the resources view, the other views of quality that traditionally have held sway in academe are those that emphasize admissions selectivity, educational processes and faculty research performance. As each of these views privileges some interests over others, debates about them can be viewed through a political lens of competition between different interests and ideologies. For example, those who favour the admissions selectivity conception of quality demonstrate an elitist view about admissions in contrast to those who place a high value on increasing accessibility and equity in higher education (Astin, 1985). Those who want to define quality in terms of conventional educational processes and requirements are in the camp of “traditionalists”, as opposed to the “reformists” who urge the adoption of innovations that would make higher education more accessible and relevant (Trow, 1973).

The somewhat counter-intuitive view that the quality of the education that students are receiving can be judged by the research performance of the institutions and departments in which the students study serves to advance the research interests of those institutions and departments but not necessarily the education of their students. In Ontario the research-performance conception of educational quality has been championed by those who believe that all universities should emulate the research university paradigm, and opposed by those who favour a more heterogeneous university system in which some institutions concentrate on educating undergraduates (Clark *et al.*, 2009). Proponents of the research performance conception of educational quality maintain that strong research performance is a necessary condition for good teaching. However, the considerable research that has been done on the relationship between faculty research performance and teaching effectiveness has failed to reveal evidence of a positive correlation between these two realms of faculty activity (Hattie and Marsh, 1996; Marsh and Hattie, 2002; Halliwell, 2008). On the basis of their studies of this relationship, Hattie and Marsh concluded that “the common belief that research and teaching are inextricably entwined is an enduring myth” (Hattie and Marsh, 1996, p. 529). The rationale for the perpetuation of this myth in the face of contradictory evidence is that it serves to justify the research preoccupation “of existing interests and institutions” (Crimmel, 1984, p. 192).

A newer view of quality that has been the subject of increasing attention within the past decade focuses on the nature of the student experience. This view is based on the assumption that the more time that students engage in educationally useful activities, the better their learning and personal development (Kuh, 2003). Examples of such activities include writing papers, discussing assignments with instructors and asking questions in class. The National Survey of Student Engagement, in which students are asked about the frequency with which they engage in certain behaviours and about their perceptions of campus life, has been used in the United States and Canada to reflect this view of quality. The choice between the student engagement view and older views of quality may be the subject of some controversy if, as seems quite likely, the student engagement view tends to support interests other than the older views. For example, in some of the key benchmarks for student-faculty interaction and academic challenge, the larger, more research intensive universities in Canada tended to score the lowest, while smaller teaching-oriented institutions tended to score the highest (Maclean’s on Campus, 2009).

The preceding paragraphs have illustrated some of the different views about what constitutes quality in higher education and how these views serve different interests and ideologies. Diversity in views about quality is not surprising because ideas of quality are both personal and social constructions that vary from

stakeholder to stakeholder (Ratcliff, 2003). How is this diversity of views as to what constitutes quality to be handled in a QA process? One way would be to invite input from all stakeholders in the design and implementation of the QA process and to strive for consensus among stakeholders. The more common way is for those who have the power to control the QA process to impose their views and values on the process. Either approach – conflict resolution or exercise of power – makes QA a political process.

QA as an instrument for promoting conformity in academe

The idea that there are strong pressures toward conformity in academe is not new. As the author noted in an earlier publication, “concerns about intellectual conformism and suppression of unorthodox thought and method are as old as organised intellectual activity itself and evoke such names as Bruno, Copernicus and Gallileo” (Skolnik, 1989, p. 620). Winchester observed that “intolerance for new and different ideas, although it has no place in the university, is often found there” (Winchester, 1986, p. 272). Kuhn maintained that science tends to operate largely within an accepted paradigm of knowledge and tends to be suspicious if not hostile to ideas that are outside that paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). Barber observed that a major theme in biographies and autobiographies of scientists is the frequency with which their new ideas were met with intolerance and often suppressed (Barber, 1962).

Prior to the development of QA, the pressure toward conformity within academe operated through a variety of mechanisms and forums, including scholarly journals, academic presses, research funding councils, departmental promotion and tenure committees, awards committees and so on. These pressures were manifested in a dispersed manner through multiple channels. QA processes constitute a more centralised, visible, and potent mechanism for promoting conformity in academe.

New or unorthodox paradigms, theories, research methods and pedagogical practices may be good or bad. However, it is difficult for most people to assess something that is new or unorthodox on its own terms rather than in relation to the older or orthodox. In fact, probably the greatest challenge in QA is to devise common standards for quality when assessing phenomena that are very different, for example a virtual university compared to a traditional university. The tendency is to equate quality with conformity to convention, and consequently to conclude that the more a programme diverges from conventional format or paradigm the poorer its quality. With its capability to stick the epithet of poor quality to its subjects, QA may be unprecedented in its power to discourage innovation in higher education.

A good example of how QA can penalise the unorthodox is provided by the studies that Harley and Lee have done on the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom within the discipline of Economics (Harley and Lee,

1997; Lee and Harley, 1998; Harley, 2002; Lee, 2007). Lee and Harley portray the field of economics as consisting of different factions that compete for status, influence and resources. They refer to the factions, differentiated by ideology and methodology, as mainstream and non-mainstream, the latter consisting of institutional, radical, post-Keynesian, Sraffian and Marxian economics. Because of their dominant position, the mainstream economists were able to capture the process through which the panel of assessors for economics in the RAE was appointed. Lee and Harley provided data that show that panel members tended to publish primarily in mainstream journals and cite mainly mainstream journals, and they argued that the panel members were not qualified to judge the quality of work published in non-mainstream journals. They argued further that in their assessments, the panel members gave a higher weight to articles published in mainstream than in non-mainstream journals.

Lee and Harley concluded that the quality of mainstream economics departments tended to be rated higher than that of non-mainstream departments. This conclusion was not based on empirical evidence about quality, but because panel members approached their task with “the paradigm-bound view that the quality of non-mainstream research is largely inferior to mainstream research” (Lee and Harley, 1998, p. 198). The research by Lee and Harley shows how a QA process can be captured by the dominant camp within a discipline and enables the dominant camp to stifle competing camps more effectively than through the more dispersed processes of peer review of individual work, one item at a time, that Kuhn described.

Alternatively, in highly centralised QA processes there is a possibility of disciplinary bias when individuals from some disciplines have the ultimate power to make decisions about the quality of programmes in other disciplines. In an earlier publication, the author analysed the case of the graduate programmes appraisals process in Ontario in which a single group of academics make quality judgments for all programmes (Skolnik, 1989). It was concluded that the process reflected primarily the paradigm and conventions of the natural sciences, and that it discriminated against some other disciplines.

Over the period studied, the range in the percentage of programmes receiving less than the highest quality rating was from zero in the natural sciences to 30% in the humanities. Within the humanities, fields that had least in common with the natural sciences did the worst: half or more of the programmes in classics, religion and education received less than the highest rating. It was noted also that “the extraordinary success of the natural science programmes is remarkable in view of the widespread concerns of the university community during this period about inadequate funding and the expectation that this could result in serious quality problems for those areas which require expensive equipment and research support” (Skolnik, 1989, p. 632). Unless faculty in the humanities were less competent than their peers in the sciences, the most

plausible explanation for this finding was that what were purported to be measures of quality were in reality measures of the extent to which programmes conformed to the model of graduate programmes that was favoured in the sciences. This conclusion was consistent with Winchester's observation that at least until that time "research" had come to be understood to mean "doing things rather like one would if the subject matter was physics or chemistry" (Winchester, 1986, p. 282). A decade later, a committee that reviewed the graduate programmes appraisals process in Ontario expressed concern about the centralisation of quality judgments across disciplines, and it recommended a realignment of the respective influence of the central appraisals body and its subject matter consultants (OCGS Review Committee, 1999).

The role of faculty in QA

The role and power of different stakeholders in QA varies considerably. Often, the ordinary faculty member has a very circumscribed role and no power. Typically in QA processes in Canada, the role of faculty is confined to the onerous task of providing data to the assessment body, and then awaiting a judgment that may have far-reaching and significant effects on his or her work and career. Faculty have little opportunity for input into the way that the process is designed, its purpose, or the criteria that are used in the assessment; nor is there much opportunity for appeal of the results. Apparently, these conditions apply to some extent in some other countries as well. For example, Hoecht noted that the Quality Assurance Agency in the United Kingdom "does not appear to be involved in a consultative open debate in its policy-making and policy implementation" (Hoecht, 2006, p. 546). The marginalisation of the faculty role in QA stands in contrast to the norms in many countries regarding the role of faculty in academic governance. Yet, today QA is arguably among the most important of higher education governance functions.

In view of the marginalisation of faculty that occurs in some QA processes, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the relatively few surveys and interview-based studies that have been done of faculty perceptions of QA show that substantial proportions of faculty have negative views about their quality assurance processes (Harley, 2002; Morley, 2003; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006). According to Anderson, the negative views of Australian academics first identified in the early 1990s still persisted (Anderson, 2006). Harley reported that the majority of academics in her study were "outrightly hostile" to the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom, either because they felt themselves personally disadvantaged, or because of "distortions that it was felt to have introduced into academic life" (Harley, 2002, p. 203). Hoecht found that QA was perceived by faculty as a form of control and an encroachment on their professional autonomy, and addressed quality only at a superficial level (Hoecht, 2006). In view of comments made earlier on possible implications of a

shift from the assessment to the audit approach in QA, it is noteworthy that some of the research on faculty perceptions of QA in the United Kingdom summarised here was done during the period when the audit approach was employed, and in those studies many faculty reported that they felt that the audits were a form of external control.

Common themes in these surveys of faculty were: feelings of marginalisation and powerlessness; that the processes were intended to serve managerial ends rather than to improve quality; and that some interests were being favoured over others. Morley noted that, paradoxically, the QA movement was perceived to be undermining quality. She observed that “the compliance culture and command economy in higher education threatens to produce self-policing, ventriloquising apparatchiks, as opportunity for cultural agency is reduced” (Morley, 2003, p. 162). Consistent with these perceptions of faculty, Harvey and Newton concluded that “the rhetoric and documentary preambles in many countries refer to quality evaluation as a process of improvement, yet all the emphases are on accountability, compliance and, in some cases, control...” (Harvey and Newton, 2004, p. 151).

The marginalisation and disempowerment of faculty that often is part of the QA process should be cause for concern if, as some observers maintain, faculty commitment to QA is essential to quality higher education (Dill *et al.*, 1996). Newton may well be right when he says that “... genuine quality enhancement can only be fully sustained if it is premised on the energies and initiatives of frontline academics” (Newton, 2000, p. 153). But if he is right, how does one reconcile this imperative with the perception that QA is oriented toward “correction and rehabilitation” of faculty (Morley, 2003, p. 50)?

An alternative evaluation paradigm

The arguments in this article support the conclusion of Harvey and Newton cited earlier that quality assessment is not “a neutral measuring process”, but is a process that is “imbued with politics” (Harvey and Newton, 2004, p. 156). Thus, rather than following a method that denies the inherent political nature of quality assurance, as is frequently the case in QA in higher education, would it not be more appropriate to employ a method that recognises this reality? There is an extensive scholarly and professional literature on evaluation that offers some useful guidance in this respect. However, the practice of QA has developed largely in isolation from that body of literature, and in fact, there is little cross referencing between the two. When viewed from the perspective of the literature on evaluation, the typical method employed for QA looks rather outmoded and deficient (Skolnik, 2000). Morley noted that “the methodology of quality assessment is perceived [by the subjects in her study] as taking the academy backwards in terms of sophistication of analysis” (Morley, 2003, p. 160).

A helpful perspective for considering possible reforms of QA is provided by Guba and Lincoln's depiction of four generations through which evaluation has evolved since its origin in the early twentieth century in elementary and secondary schooling (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The first three of these generations were: evaluation as measurement; evaluation as description; and evaluation as judgment. While there were unique issues in each of these three orientations, a problem common to all was the failure to recognise the competing values, perceptions and interests of different stakeholders. Another characteristic was managerialism, the tendency to view evaluation from the perspective of the manager. Guba and Lincoln note that a consequence of this orientation was that the manager was placed outside the evaluation, whereas management might be a significant part of the problem. Also, the managerial orientation tended to disempower other stakeholders.

Guba and Lincoln depict fourth generation evaluation as attempting to remedy the problems of the earlier generation models. The fourth generation model embraces value-pluralism and takes as its starting point the claims, concerns and issues put forth by **all** stakeholders. It employs a constructivist as opposed to a positivist paradigm. It changes the role of the evaluator from that of technical expert or judge to that of mediator and negotiator. It makes evaluation a **collaborative** rather than a top-down process. Some of these characteristics of fourth generation evaluation smack of postmodernism, and models of evaluation with these characteristics have sometimes been referred to as postmodern evaluation (Mabry, 2002, p. 14).

Guba and Lincoln's fourth generation model of evaluation has many similarities to the "responsive" model of evaluation developed by Robert Stake (Stake, 1980). The essential feature of this approach to evaluation is responsiveness to key issues and problems identified by stakeholders during the evaluation process, rather than responsiveness to programme theory or stated goals (Stake, 2004, p. 89). Stake describes responsive evaluation as "a general perspective in the search for quality", and as "an attitude more than a model or recipe" (Stake, 2004, p. 86). While Guba and Lincoln portray their fourth generation evaluation as a naturalistic alternative to criterion-based evaluation, Stake seeks to combine responsive and standards-based evaluation. However, Stake acknowledges that interpretive thinking – which is the hallmark of responsive evaluation – does not blend easily with criterial thinking.

Looking at quality assessment in higher education through the lens of Guba and Lincoln's four generations of evaluation, it appears that as QA developed in the 1970s and 1980s, the judgment model predominated. The judges were drawn primarily from an academically conservative elite and imposed their own fairly narrow view of academic quality that emphasised resources, admissions selectivity, educational process criteria and research reputation. As the accountability movement gained steam in the 1990s,

emphasis shifted to the measurement model. Within the past decade the interest in institutional performance indicators has shifted to the measurement of student learning. Ironically, that shift takes us back full circle to the origins of the field of evaluation in the measurement of student learning, then in the elementary and secondary schools, now in universities and colleges.

Although it has been identified as a model that could be used for QA (Conrad and Wilson, 1985), the responsive model of evaluation has not been used much in this field. The continued persistence of the earlier models of evaluation in QA, over the responsive model, is curious given the growth of constructivist and postmodern influences in academe. The dearth of use of the responsive model suggests that the individuals who exercise the greatest power within and over higher education are largely not constructivists or postmodernists. They are more likely to have a neo-liberal orientation (Olssen and Peters, 2005). The lack of interest in the responsive model may also reflect the strength of the natural sciences, a branch of academe where constructivism has made little impact, in higher education policy making.

Conclusion

Insofar as QA is to a large extent a political process, it is healthier to recognise the political dimension of QA than to try to sweep it under the carpet. Likewise, it is important to be clear about the purpose of QA, specifically whether it is intended to serve merely as a ritual in which to “feed the [accountability] beast” (Newton, 2000, p. 155), to enforce a particular ideology or set of policies, or to foster improvement in education. If there is a genuine desire to recognise the diverse views regarding quality and to strive for educational improvement, then the quality assessment process should be designed in a way that will further these ends. The literature on evaluation can be helpful in finding such a design. In particular, serious attention might be given to the responsive model of evaluation, which provides a framework for involving faculty and other stakeholders in QA in a meaningful, collaborative way.

It is worth stressing that inherent in the responsive model of evaluation is the idea that the input and influence of **all** stakeholders should be sought and facilitated. While it is common for faculty to be excluded from a significant role in quality assurance processes, it would be a mistake to swing to the opposite situation wherein faculty control QA, and other stakeholders, *e.g.* students, employers and the public, are excluded. Some faculty may try to limit the operational definition of quality to resources and other traditional conceptions of quality, whereas there is much to be said for the relevance and value of newer conceptions like learning outcomes and student engagement. The appropriate way to view quality may vary considerably from one context to another. The healthiest way to deal with the political nature of QA is to

accept the diversity of views and interests of all stakeholders and work toward the reconciliation of those diverse views and interests. Perhaps foremost among the standards for academic audits should be the inclusiveness and transparency of the QA process.

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