

# **Academic Quality Assurance: Global Imperatives and National Responses**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper reviews the reasons for the increasing international prominence of quality assurance in higher education. It identifies the aims of academic quality assurance, and describes a model of the levels at which academic quality assurance systems operate. It discusses the widening range of activities encompassed by academic quality assurance, and reports on some of the challenges currently facing the formation and implementation of academic quality assurance policies and practices in England. It concludes with a summary of the opportunities for developing the academic quality assurance systems of Bangladesh.*

## **Introduction**

Throughout the world, in both the more and the less well-developed countries, higher education is undergoing a radical transformation. All governments are aware of the economic and social significance of the information age, and of the challenge this poses to their ability to sustain national economic growth in a globalized economy. They have responded by giving priority to ensuring that their national education systems, and particularly their higher education sectors, are able to provide them with a competitive advantage. This strategic response has typically embraced three interrelated factors: the expansion of higher education; an emphasis on skills for employability; and a demand for public accountability.

The specific form of the governmental response to the global imperative for mass higher education necessarily reflects the context within which it is set. The expansion of higher education in the UK, for example, has been legitimated through the rhetoric of social inclusiveness, but has

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been accomplished by means of a progressive reduction in the unit of public resource per student paid to universities, accompanied by the expectation that universities should diversify their income streams and attract a greater proportion of their financing from private sources (both individuals, through tuition fees, and business, through research and consultancy contracts). In Bangladesh, a new sector of private universities is being rapidly established to meet the demand for higher education. In the UK, the skills agenda is being addressed through the inclusion of transferable core competences within the curriculum, recorded on personal development portfolios. In Bangladesh, a more market-driven approach is being taken, through the provision of programs, in for example Business Studies and Computer Science, with direct applicability to the needs of employers.

A universally consistent feature of the massification of higher education is the demand from governments and other stakeholders for an increased level of public accountability for the standards and quality of universities' provision. The rationale for the heightened accountability regime is essentially financial and instrumental: higher education is an expensive service, and governments understandably seek reassurance that the budgets are being used both wisely and consistently with national policy objectives. Performance targets are set with the intention of measuring the progress of higher education institutions in preparing a workforce with the skills to compete successfully in the global economy, and intricate academic quality assurance systems are introduced to demonstrate that standards are being maintained despite resource constraint.

### **General Model of Quality Assurance**

The academic quality assurance process may be conceptualized using the general model developed by van Vught and Westerheijden from the University of Twente in the Netherlands. Slightly adapted, their model (F van Vught and D F Westerheijden 1993) consists of:

- (1) the establishment of a national co-coordinating body, relatively autonomous from the state;
- (2) the preparation of a written self-assessment at the level of the subject/program or the institution;
- (3) external evaluation (judgment) by academic peers;

- (4) published reports on the findings and conclusions of the academic peers;
- (5) follow-up action on the part of the institution, leading to improvement

Where the academic review procedure is internal to the institution concerned, the senate or equivalent may be substituted for the national body in (1), and subject or program or departmental self-evaluation may be substituted for institutional self-evaluation in (2).

It is important to distinguish the level at which academic quality assurance activities are conducted: national, institutional, or program/subject. It is not necessary to adopt the modified van Vught and Westerheijden model in its entirety: a country may not have a national external quality assurance system, for example, or there may be no quality assurance procedures at the institutional level. In Slovakia, the National Accreditation Commission operates exclusively at the program level because, in common with other central European countries, individual faculties are legal entities; in the Netherlands, the approach of the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU) is based on disciplines; and in France the Comite National d'Evaluation conducts its assessments institutionally (Ottenwaelter 2001).

A further modification to van Vught and Westerheijden's model might incorporate the international dimension. Institutions are becoming increasingly interested in positioning themselves internationally: perhaps the best example is the aim of the top European business schools to seek AMBA accreditation, but the validation arrangements that exist between some UK universities and colleges in the developing world are evidence of the demand, in a competitive higher education marketplace, for calibration against established providers.

Irrespective of levels, however, self-assessment, on one hand, and external peer group evaluation, on the other, are essential characteristics of all mature academic quality assurance systems, and are indicative of the presence a self-reflective academic community. In the absence of self-evaluation, a national quality assurance system can become an oppressive system of inspection by 'experts'. And academic quality assurance is unlikely to be effective without the involvement of external

peers to test the claims of practitioners, whether at institutional or at subject/program levels.

### **Aims of Academic Quality Assurance**

Academic quality assurance in England has three broad aims:

- it offers systematic assurance to the academic community internal to a University that its provision is excellent
- it provides a means of accountability to external stakeholders for quality, standards and value for money
- it offers opportunities for the identification and transmission of good practice

Academic quality assurance thus seeks to address a diverse range of interests. Among the most prominent are: to enhance the reputation of the individual university and its constituent subjects; to protect the educational experience of students and the financial investment of the Government; and to ensure that the development and teaching of subjects takes full account of contemporary advances in knowledge.

Systematic academic quality assurance has been a feature of higher education in the UK since at least 1956, when the National Council for Technological Awards was founded. At that time, its aims were essentially developmental, offering a framework within which the colleges of advanced technology could with confidence be permitted to offer degree-equivalent awards. Increasingly, however, the focus of academic quality assurance on the subject/program and institutional levels became broader, reflecting the transition of higher education from an elite to a mass system, in turn raising concerns about costs, economic competitiveness and customer satisfaction.

In England, the national co-coordinating body is the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA), which currently undertakes reviews at institutional and subject levels. Institutional audit/review is conducted to a six-year cycle, and is focused on the effectiveness with which the quality assurance systems established by individual institutions operate. Subject review was originally planned on a six-year cycle, but the first cycle actually took ten years to complete: each subject (all disciplines were grouped into 42 subjects for the purposes of external subject

review) was reviewed in whichever institution it was taught. The reviews were conducted on the basis suggested by the model: institutions were required to prepare analytical accounts (for the institutional audits) and self-assessment documents (for the subject reviews), which are discussed with the staff concerned by external peers during visits (normally of four days) organized by the QAA.

In addition, the QAA has drawn up a set of codes of practice, subject benchmark statements and a national qualifications framework that are intended to govern universities' procedures for assuring academic quality and standards and their relationships with students. The extent of individual institutions' compliance with these provisions is one of the principal topics of discussion during institutional audit/reviews.

The national system of external quality assurance is complemented by academic quality assurance systems devised and managed by individual institutions. There is no single approach as the QAA does not impose a standardized methodology for internal quality assurance: institutional autonomy is highly prized in England, and each institution has its own preferred way of working. Broadly, however, all universities have procedures in place for the academic approval of new programs, for monitoring annually the development of programs, and for reviewing periodically the progress of programs or subjects. All universities have external examiners, who are subject specialists appointed from other institutions to confirm academic standards by approving assessments and sampling students' scripts: the external examiners report in writing annually on their findings to the vice chancellors concerned. All institutions also have mechanisms for sampling student opinion, whether through student membership of committees, questionnaires of student satisfaction, or forums for discussion established especially to hear students' views. Finally, all institutions have human resource management policies designed to enhance academic quality – for example, resources (especially time) for research, staff induction arrangements, procedures for the conferment of professorships, and processes for the peer observation of teaching.

### **The Focus of Academic Quality Assurance**

As well as the level of operation – international, national, institutional or subject/program – quality assurance has a range of dimensions. The

focus of quality assurance may be on research, teaching, the student experience or academic standards, and the quality assurance systems developed by individual institutions will reflect the balance of emphasis of their missions. Taking each of these in turn:

- a) research may be considered excellent in the regional, national or international contexts. The more research-intensive a university's mission, the more it is likely to strive towards research of international excellence. In the UK, the quality of institutions' research outputs (as measured largely by the rate of publication in top-ranked refereed journals) is peer-assessed every five years by the Higher Education Funding Councils through the research assessment exercise, and resources are distributed to institutions in the light of their overall scores of volume and caliber. The result of the research assessment exercise has the effect of concentrating research activity in a small number of top-ranking universities. The research assessment exercise, incidentally, provides an example of an exception to van Vught and Westerheijden's general model, as there is no meeting between the research teams and the funding councils' panels, and there is as a consequence no written report: the only outcome is a numerical grade. It is also the clearest example in the UK of external quality assurance having a direct influence on the allocation of resources.
- b) teaching quality is a multi-layered concept, embracing such components as curriculum design, teaching and learning methods, assessment strategies, and staff expertise. Academic quality assurance systems have conventionally concentrated on this area, seeking to ensure that programs can safely be delivered to students ('right first time') and that program teams provide evidence annually, and in more depth periodically, that the provision has been modified in response to issues arising from experience and to advances in the academic community about the content of the subject and how it should be taught. Ultimately, however, the key teaching quality matter to be addressed through the academic quality assurance system is the determination of confidence in the staff team responsible for delivering the program in question: has this staff team designed a program that is capable of providing students with an appropriate quality of educational experience, and is this staff team capable of delivering its program to the required

academic standard? The answers institutions give to these questions will, in part, reflect their differentiated missions, with some emphasizing pure 'blue skies' research as a basis for confidence, and others emphasizing the currency of the engagement of their staff with professional practice as exemplified through their work with employers and professional bodies, and their contribution to economic development in their region.

- c) the quality assurance of teaching and learning strategies is an area in which there has been a certain level of sustained interest in the UK over a considerable period. The evanescence and private character of the teaching process, and the commanding status of research within universities, have however resulted in the relative neglect of teaching and learning as a discrete activity. The recent establishment in the UK of the Institute of Learning and Teaching, a professional body for lecturers in higher education, has redressed the balance somewhat through its accreditation of programs of teaching induction and its networks of professional support activities. Furthermore, teaching practice was given prominence through the national subject review system of the QAA, which included direct classroom observation in its program for visits. There is the clear expectation on the part of the QAA that institutions should introduce their own schemes of classroom observation, but the link between classroom observation, regarded as peer support for lecturers, on the one hand, and staff appraisal, with its disciplinary connotations, on the other hand, has proved highly controversial. The system in the UK is far removed from the widespread practice in the USA of student evaluation of lecturers' performance;
- d) students' perceptions of the overall quality of their experience is of course influenced to a significant extent by the quality of the teaching they receive, but the learning and social environments (support staff and physical resources) are also vital factors. The importance of environmental considerations has increased in the UK as the formerly elite higher education system is transformed into a mass, marketized system, and some of the ramifications of this transition are discussed later. But larger student numbers, together with an increasing dependence on information and communications technology to support students' learning

(irrespective of whether the students are on or off campus), have emphasized the importance of the library as a service for students, and of the sophistication of levels of equipment in lecture theatres and laboratories. From a completely different perspective, the pattern of students' complaints offers an insight into levels of satisfaction with institutional performance;

- e] as suggested above, academic standards may, fundamentally, be regarded as residing in specialist staff, underpinned by clear systems. The concept of academic standards applies to the academic level of an award, and the attainment of an individual student against that level. Within the UK, external examiners play a key role in setting and confirming the attainment of appropriate academic standards by approving assessments and sampling students' scripts, and they participate as full (and pre-eminent) members of boards of examiners at which students' progression and awards are determined. A greater systematization of the aims, objectives and learning outcomes of programs and their constituent modules/units/courses is leading to a more open understanding of the components of academic standards, facilitating national calibration. Other components of the systems contributing to the maintenance of academic standards include the admissions process, and the arrangements for the supervision and examination of research degree candidates.

While staff expertise is the determining factor underlying all the other quality assurance processes, assessment of that expertise is most appropriately addressed professionally and non-confrontationally through proxy indicators, such as a lecturer's engagement in research, scholarship or professional activities. Emphasis is given to training and developmental activities designed to enhance capability, supplemented by annual review processes and selection procedures for promoted posts. The style of human resource management in UK universities, using consent rather than command methods as appropriate to collegiate institutions, has become a matter of national prominence within the UK as pressures are felt from two sides: a progressively diminishing unit of resource; and the policy expectation on the part of the Government that universities should become more entrepreneurial and give greater priority to their contribution to the enhancement of national economic competitiveness within the global economy.



Such high policy imperatives apart, a university's first concern must be to its students, and, increasingly, a key focus of attention of academic quality assurance systems is directed at monitoring and enhancing the quality of the student experience. Essentially, the student experience can be divided into two separate components: the student's program of study; and the learning and social environments provided by the institution. Both have typically been addressed through the instruments already identified: surveys of student satisfaction; student membership of academic committees; and the establishment of forums, sometimes under the auspices of the Board of Governors, where students' views can be heard.

Within a marketized mass higher education system, however, such a limited range of responses is inadequate, and one of the challenges facing universities is to identify and establish new ways of engaging with an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous body of students. In particular, institutions are learning how to identify and respond to differentiated sets of needs while applying a common framework of standards.

Firstly, the learning and environmental needs and expectations of students vary according to the segment they occupy, whether distinguished by age, social class, ethnicity, culture, nationality, mode of attendance or other measure, and institutions must ensure that the curriculum, teaching methodologies and appropriate corporate facilities are equally accessible to each group. Social inclusiveness and valuing diversity are high on the UK Government's agenda for higher education, serving both social and economic aims.

Secondly, and overlaid on this heterogeneity, is the issue within the UK of students' fees, long-established in the case of part-time and overseas students but only recently introduced for full-time home students. The requirement to pay fees has resulted in an appreciable shift towards the concept of the students as customer – perhaps a metaphorical usage, given that students remain responsible for making their own contribution to their learning experiences, but expectations on the part of students about the quality of service they experience are nevertheless raised. The management of cultural change towards a more customer centered environment is one of the pressing quality assurance challenges facing universities in the UK, with ramifications across a wide range of areas – for example, accurate and helpful pre-enrolment information,

comprehensive and accurate student guides and handbooks, student enrolment and induction procedures, and student residential accommodation.

Thirdly, there is a more insistent call from the Government in the UK, reinforced by the production of national performance indicators, to encourage universities to take greater responsibility for the learning opportunities available to students with a view to increasing student retention rates. The Government's stance is that its policy to widen participation (to a target age participation rate of 50% within 10 years), itself a response to increasing global competitiveness, must not be confounded by correspondingly higher rates of withdrawal. The quality assurance implications of improving student retention rates, embracing for example enhanced academic induction, improved curriculum design and better academic counseling opportunities, are highly significant and challenging, given that the less wealthy the students the greater their propensity to withdraw from higher education before completion of the awards for which they are registered.

For the first time, academic support staff (including academic counselors and administrators, as well as learning resources staff and technicians) are routinely being drawn into the academic quality assurance system, as inclusive concepts of quality management and, indeed, customer service supplant the prevailing more restrictive emphasis on academic programs and subjects.

### **Quality Assurance Challenges**

Attention has been given earlier in this paper to some of the challenges currently presented to academic quality assurance systems in England, notably:

- an emphasis on student retention and achievement as an element of value for money
- the professionalization of academic staff as teachers in higher education, and
- the development of a customer culture among all staff
- the application of new developments in information and communications technology to the program delivery and learning process

Other contemporary developments that are broadening the scope of academic quality assurance, and challenging conventional ideas of quality assurance in English universities, are:

- the expectation that academic staff collectively will have an increasingly more extensive role in commercial affairs and income generation to meet the imperative for diversified income streams
- the active engagement of academic staff, and through them their students, with the knowledge economy, creating wealth by means of high-value knowledge-intensive jobs
- the generation of more accurate and differentiated information for academic decision-taking
- the need for more robust and informative student complaints systems, and the implications for universities' independence of the proposal that students' interests should be secured through a binding national external arbitration system

To return to the broad aims of academic quality assurance in England discussed earlier, all these developments have the potential to influence an institution's reputation either positively or negatively, and as such come within the broad definition and sphere of influence of quality assurance systems at all levels.

### **Some Possible Implications for Bangladesh**

Higher education in Bangladesh is changing rapidly in response to the same international social and economic forces that are also driving its development in England. In both countries, there is a strong demand for vocationally relevant higher education, particularly in business and management, and in the new and creative media. An additional force for change, promoted by the World Bank and other international agencies, is the movement towards outcomes-based higher education, and the accompanying academic credit structures to facilitate comparability (and student transfer) between different national systems. These, together with the increasing demand from stakeholders for accountability, entail the development of academic quality assurance structures that offer threshold safeguards of standards. On the other hand, each national higher education system operates within a specific context, and the successful transposition of elements of the international academic quality assurance experience to Bangladesh would require careful and critical

appraisal. Affordability from both public and private sources is another important consideration.

Higher education in Bangladesh presents a number of distinctive features that offer a possible set of priorities for the development of a national system of quality assurance. The fundamentals of such a system are already in place.

As one priority, steps might be taken to increase the level of engagement that students have with their universities. Student engagement occurs at two distinct levels: enhancing the interactive nature of, and students' critical and creative engagement with, the learning process as demonstrated by teaching materials, the nature of assignments, and the qualitative feedback provided to individual students; and improving the quality of feedback from students on their satisfaction with their overall learning experience, through surveys, student-staff meetings, and student representation on committees.

As another priority, steps might be taken to increase the level of engagement that staff have with their universities. The professionalism of the teaching staff should be highly visible, and is demonstrable for example through the rigor of the staff appointment process, pedagogical training and development activities, as well as rigorous research, scholarly and professional practice activities. Quality assurance is essentially a collective process, entailing accountability from staff teams to the University's academic community on the approval of new programs, and the annual monitoring and periodic review of provision. The primary internal responsibility for the quality of academic provision resides in staff teams, formally constituted as the Senate (or equivalent) or as the committees and boards reporting to it. The conditions necessary for well-founded academic judgments include academic staffs who are fully committed to their universities.

A final priority might be the establishment by individual universities of arrangements for external calibration through peers from the wider academic and employers' communities. External peer group review should be an integral feature of curriculum design, program validation and the setting of standards. Committed to the external calibration of its academic activities against the norms prevailing in the higher education

sector should be a key element of any university's quality assurance strategy.

The radical implications of the introduction of a national system of academic quality assurance should however not be underestimated. Evidence from The Times Higher Education Supplement, the weekly journal for higher education in the UK, suggests that, despite the longevity of the quality assurance systems there, academics continue to question the premises on which they are based. Two quotations from one issue make the point: 'You cannot dragoon academics into creativity by individual or group targets or by any other type of performance indicator'; and 'The University should remain a democratic self-governing body of scholars' (THES 2002). Similar warnings about the increasing oppressiveness of accountability, and the damage it can do to the relationship of trust between professionals and their clients, were sounded in the BBC's Reith lectures for 2002 (O'Neill). The lectures expressed the view that real accountability should provide substantive and knowledgeable independent judgment of an institution's or professional's work, promoting a culture in which professionals are free to serve the public rather than their paymasters. For universities, a strong internal quality assurance system is a prerequisite for the freedom from oppressive accountability which external agencies can impose in the name of value for money.

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