

## Transformative Quality for Business Schools

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### Abstract

QAA and the use of commercial models such as EFQM place a heavy burden on academic institutions. A lighter touch, focusing on 'transformative quality', where schools and departments undertake their own quality initiatives in a bottom-up approach, may be the way forward.

### As it has been

The first phase of the QAA reviews of Teaching Quality Assessment were conducted from 1997-2001, resulting in over 3,000 institutional reports on subject reviews and audits and a further 60 subject overviews. It was estimated that the TQA cost the sector £100 million in paperwork and staff time, as well as the QAA's own administrative costs of £3-5 million annually. However, only 4 out of 665 departments were identified in which the teaching was judged to be unacceptably low. Dissatisfaction with the heavier burden posed by subject review has led to the evolution of a 'light touch' approach with periodic audit trails to check the effectiveness of the institution's own mechanisms for quality assurance, coupled with an increased focus upon continual quality enhancement. Auditing regimes are already quite heavy apart from QAA (in the Business area we can mention ABS, AMBA, EQUIS, AACSB). Moreover, higher education will need (vide NSS) to become responsive to its students, who will increasingly regard themselves as customers, and to the possibilities of 'third stream' funding for knowledge transfer activities linking universities with their business and professional hinterlands.

However, a pessimistic review of the history of quality evaluation has led one prominent researcher (Harvey 2005) to conclude that 'at heart, the British system of quality monitoring failed to engage with transformative learning and teaching'. In their content analysis of 164 Business and Management subject review reports, Ottewill and Macfarlane (2004) discerned a mismatch between the espoused philosophy of 'fitness for purpose' and implicit pedagogic principles embodying quality as 'excellence'. They further suggest that these principles (e.g. self-criticism, embedding good practice) can enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

### The changing face of quality management

Quality management in HE is changing. The well-established QAA processes such as institutional audit are based on a fitness for purpose model. Such an approach, whilst guaranteeing the achievement of good standards, does not provide a framework for radical improvement. In particular, it does not adequately address the transformative conception of quality which may be characterised by achieving objectives such as those outlined by Harvey (1993):

- shifting from teaching to learning;
- developing explicit skills, attitudes, and abilities as well as knowledge;
- developing appropriate assessment procedures;
- rewarding transformative teaching;
- encouraging discussion of pedagogy;
- providing transformative learning for academics;
- fostering new collegiality;
- linking quality improvement to learning;
- auditing improvement.

There have been several attempts to go beyond the QAA model by applying models whose genesis is in commercial practice. An example is the undoubtedly complex EFQM excellence model with its roots in TQM methodology. The eight fundamental underpinning concepts are embodied in a version tailored to HE that involves a self-assessment requiring the collection of evidence against nine criteria and thirty-two sub-criteria. Performance is then enhanced through the management of processes at all levels and throughout the institution. The model is a top-down one, with change initiated through institutional leadership. In the US the somewhat similar Baldrige model has been widely used.

### **Bringing transformative quality to the business school**

Such institutional-wide quality initiatives are not the only way to transform quality. Another approach is for departments and schools, much closer to the problems of delivery and development, to undertake their own initiatives. The success of such a bottom-up approach will depend on two main factors: the extent to which the institutional framework encourages quality initiatives and quality development at school and department level and the capability of school and department heads to undertake their own quality changes. We need to develop support tools for such people to help them to develop their quality processes. Such tools would encourage innovation in teaching, transfer of good practice, structured reflection, self-evaluation and would be very much peer driven. In adopting such a bottom-up approach it must be recognised that departments and schools vary considerably. The quality assurance issues posed by a few HE students in an FE college are unlikely to be the same as those facing a large university school.

Although 'Quality' is a contested concept the typologies of quality into 'excellence', 'perfection' (or consistency), 'fitness for purpose', 'value for money' and 'transformation' is widely accepted (Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey 2005). Harvey and Green's notion of 'transformative' quality may be used to explore quality initiatives conducted largely at sub-institutional (i.e. faculty, departmental) level. Some researchers are already using the concept of transformative quality as a starting point for the development of alternative and holistic models of quality management (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2005) It is possible that some models (e.g. EFQM, see Pupius and Steed, 2005) are already capable of being applied at only a process level. To what extent can departments exercise a degree of autonomy in their own quality management given the fact that they are also part of a wider system of quality assurance in their host universities? Quality assurance on the one hand and 'transformative' teaching and learning on the other may well map onto differing routes of accountability within a university; this may be reflected by differing communities of practice and even find expression in the spheres of influence exerted for quality assurance on the one hand (QAA) and transformative quality on the other (The HEA).

The question is how can 'transformative quality' be nurtured and operationalised, and how can departments which exhibit a culture of excellence demonstrate transformative quality in their modus operandi and departmental policies?

### **References**

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