

# Cui bono? - The Relevance and Impact of Quality Assurance<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

External quality assurance in universities is to assure society that higher education standards are adequate, and in an increasingly global market, that they are comparable internationally. While society has accepted the implicit compact giving autonomy to universities in return for their dispassionate service to it, there has been an increasing demand for accountability.

The introduction of quality assurance systems is a measure of accountability, but it can only succeed if it is acknowledged to measure what is important to society in a manner that it can understand. This paper argues that evaluation and quality assurance must measure standards and outcomes against international thresholds and report in a way that is comprehensible to a lay audience.

## **Introduction**

### *Increasing Calls for Public Accountability*

The success of universities as the servants of society has relied on their autonomy and the concept of intellectual freedom. These qualities resonate throughout the history of universities and their absence in a university is taken to imply that it has lost its claim to be one. But what does this autonomy mean? Taken to its logical conclusion, it means that university staff should be free to pursue knowledge wherever it may lead and however uncomfortable the results of that knowledge may be; that universities will decide what is to be taught and determine their own academic standards. It represents the Socratic task of universities towards their societies, in which truth should not be alloyed by the consequences of being spoken publicly – a university's research should be made public and freely available.

Academic teaching and research will be under the control of the academy, subject to no external authority which might diminish the university's autonomy, even if this ideal has never been fully realised.

The reciprocal obligation is that universities will indeed serve society and not themselves. The implicit compact between universities and their societies assumes that there is a shared understanding of what a university is and what its purposes are.

However, recent work, including that by Callan and Immerwahr, indicates that this shared understanding, if it ever fully existed, given the frequent reference to universities as ivory towers, is under stress (Callan and Immerwahr, 2008). It seems that universities are seen to be self-serving and unwilling to meet the changing needs of societies. The recent concern expressed by the United States Congress about the retained investments of universities (private as well as public) which some believe are serving to enrich the universities rather than to serve their students is further evidence of eroding trust, as is the calls for more evident community engagement.

When universities were seen as clearly not-for-profit institutions, whether funded by government or privately, they could be assumed to be acting for the ultimate good of society. But as universities have been required to seek more funding from external sources, the public nature of their research has been reduced by the need to commercialise ideas. Universities now often sign confidentiality contracts with their funding sponsors that prevent the early

publication of results. Derek Bok has argued that in their eagerness to make money universities have effectively exchanged their public compact for a Faustian one, jeopardising their fundamental mission through agreements that compromise basic academic values (Bok, 2003).

Universities are coming to appear more like for-profit organisations, leaving the question open as to why society should subsidise them. If it does it can reasonably expect a return on its investment. The ideal of the university is being altered by the universities themselves without a concomitant change in their expectations of public support.

The requirement for a return on investment brings with it the need for governments to regulate higher education because they continue to have a duty to assure their societies that those institutions that claim to be offering a higher education are doing so at an appropriate level – a duty not dissimilar to that which is exercised through general consumer protection legislation.

With the development from elite to mass higher education and the growth in the number of higher education institutions, concerns also began to emerge about the relative merits of different institutions and their standards. The exposure of a far larger proportion of society to higher education has created a core of sophisticated consumers interested in how well it is doing its job.

There is now an apparent similarity in university products but are they indeed the same? How would society know whether standards had fallen if universities are able to use their autonomy to hide from public accountability? Society is demanding evidence and information in a form it can understand and act upon. Suggesting that any variation is merely a reflection of diversity is likely to be regarded with scepticism, unless a clear measure of value adding can be demonstrated.

As a system world-wide, higher education has not been sufficiently responsive to this growing sense of unease about what it does and who it does it for. Calls for quality assurance were an early sign that things were about to change as societies demanded more accountability from their public institutions. Higher education should have been better at predicting this change and it should have developed its own measures of quality assurance so that it would not be forced into using those developed by government (Massaro, 1996, 1998), an approach taken by the Dutch higher education system at least in its early manifestations of quality assurance. I remain of the view that while higher education has been forced into accepting quality assurance there is still a mismatch between what it has been prepared to provide and what the public actually wants. This is confirmed by the 2006 and 2008 statements from the OECD Education Ministers and by the US Commission on Higher Education (OECD, 2006, 2008a; US Higher Education, 2006).

### *International Rankings*

If any more evidence were needed to demonstrate that the public and their political representatives are looking for something different from what quality assurance has provided, we should look at the recent world-wide interest in rankings - a good example of incorrect measures being taken as surrogates for quality assurance simply because they are presentable in an apparently simple table, with the semblance of a metrics-based system by which institutions can be judged. International rankings have become the indicators of educational

quality. Yet they were not meant or designed to measure educational quality – arguably the best designed and reliable one, the Jiao Tong Index, was designed to measure the research performance of institutions based on a set of criteria that suit the current policy environment of China and its aims for higher education and research (Williams, 2008; Hazelkorn, 2007). Yet, despite the fact that students are mostly interested in undergraduate and professional education, institutions and governments have become obsessed with their place in international rankings or their claims to world class status (Hazelkorn, 2008; Salmi, 2007).

So in a peculiar chain of events, research performance has become a proxy for educational standards simply because research rankings are easier to develop than a set of rational and accepted measures of academic standards – measuring the measurable rather than the important, with no regard to fitness for purpose, skewing the focus of institutions towards research productivity.

This is an absurd way to deal with the quality and performance of higher education institutions, but while it is acknowledged that they are not measures of educational quality it is left to those who are not highly ranked to argue that they are meaningless for this purpose while the highly ranked are happy to continue the charade.

While the OECD Education Ministers, in their January 2008 statement, hinted that rankings and standards are not the same thing (OECD, 2008a), they and higher education should be making the statement clearly to their publics – irrespective of where or how many of their institutions are ranked in a research driven model, it has nothing to do with quality of education. The corollary of making such a statement would require that there be well-developed and public measures for standards and outcomes, but these do not exist. There is therefore an urgent need to develop an alternative measure for the quality of undergraduate education.

Calls for accountability will continue and intensify. The concern is that higher education will continue to be wrong-footed by not preparing itself, not listening to the public and not providing it with what it wants. Governments do not act without evidence that the public might want them to. But when they believe they have that evidence, they also tend to react in ways that suit their political cycle, with little regard for the planning that might be required to achieve the intended result.

### **The Response to Calls for Quality Assurance**

When higher education realised that it needed to do something about quality assurance it opted for a simple solution. Relying on measures of process, with little evidence that these led to good outcomes, let alone standards, it argued that anything else would endanger the autonomy of institutions.

Yet institutions persist in promoting courses by extolling the virtues, qualities and capabilities that they will engender in students. As autonomous institutions with the means and expertise to measure their own quality and standards it would follow that these statements would be supported by a public rationale and a description of how this is done objectively and rigorously: that students were tested at entry and exit to demonstrate improvement or change; that standards were measured against local and international peers; that outcomes were measured. These assumptions remain in the minds of society, but with few exceptions no evidence has been produced which society can understand.

The 2006 meeting of OECD Education Ministers concluded that systems were needed to measure outcomes as well as the appropriateness of higher education, and confirmed that there was international concern about existing quality assurance systems (OECD, 2006).

One might have expected higher education to have come to an agreement on such fundamental questions as quality assurance and standards, but as recently as 2006 the Vice-President of ENQA, stated that there is no globally agreed definition of quality in higher education and that it does not have a single purpose, a single method, or a single operational definition. He went on to say that it can mean many different things in different contexts, with a diversity of purposes for quality assurance, quality assurance models, methods, and outcomes. He maintained that quality could only be assured by those responsible for providing higher education. He concluded by pointing out that “Quality” frequently includes “standards” but these are different things (Puirseil, 2006).

For the higher education system not to have resolved these issues over the past twenty years suggests that it has been focusing on other things. Perhaps the process driven approach has led institutions not to take the quality assurance sufficiently seriously and a culture of compliance has developed that causes universities to submit to the audits and have done with them so that teaching and research can be resumed. Alternatively, the focus may have been so much on the possible loss of autonomy that there has been a reluctance to examine the real measures. The time has now come where a failure to act to provide real answers to the public’s questions will indeed lead to a loss of autonomy because, like the US Commission and apparently the US public, other governments might believe that the time is ripe to further regulate the system.

Yet there is a remarkable lack of appreciation within the sector that it is not reading the public mind. It is instructive to read one perspective on the reasons for the proposed changes in the US from Judith Eaton examining the proposed changes from the perspective of 2014 (Eaton, 2008):

“Voluntary accreditation was undermined by a public that now vested greater authority in government judgment about performance of colleges and universities rather than accreditation, a nongovernmental, rather obscure and “private” source of judgment of quality that had come to be viewed as inadequate. The press and elected officials, increasingly reflecting public sentiment, were routinely describing accreditation as insular and, at times, even arrogant in its lack of full transparency and responsiveness to the public...universities and accreditors underestimated the persistence and intensity of calls for greater public accountability.”

Eaton makes no attempt to show why the public was wrong, chastising it rather for its lack of appreciation of the advantages of a self-regulating system. One is tempted to recall the words of Adam Smith that “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public” (Smith, 1776).

Consumers are accustomed to buying products whose quality can be measured or about which they can find information; and they are accustomed to getting a guarantee. Higher Education makes no such claims – except in course brochures – and gives no guarantees; its answer to quality assurance and standards is that we will recognise it when we see it. Quality and standards are different things. Does this mean that it is possible to have high quality

institutions with low standards? Or does it mean that quality can be measured while standards cannot? But if the purpose of higher education is to provide a quality education of some comparable value what is the point of measuring quality if it says little or nothing about standards?

The definition of standards and outcomes will be difficult, needing to take account of national and international contexts, but there must be some agreement on standards at an international level before a definition is imposed from outside. Threshold standards should be defined as those against which all performance can be measured and judged and institutions should be encouraged to demonstrate that they can achieve superior performance – not unlike car makers, which are obliged to fit all vehicles with essential standard features, but encouraged through competition to raise standards.

### **Quality Assurance Models**

The resultant quality assurance systems have varied across the international spectrum, and they have been governed by the approach of governments to the question of university autonomy and the balance between autonomy and regulation. In countries like Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2007) and the Netherlands (NUFFIC, 2008), where accreditation has been a traditional role of government, the quality assurance systems have tended to assess programmes as well as institutions, with the possibility that a programme might be de-registered or a subject deemed inappropriate as part of an approved programme. In the United Kingdom there is a strong tradition of both institutional audits and subject reviews, underpinned by subject benchmark statements. Each of these systems is aimed at determining the quality of outcomes.

In the US there has been a reliance on voluntary accreditation at the State level. However, the 2006 Report of the US Commission on Charting the Future of Higher Education found “a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of post-secondary institutions, ... a ... lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students”, leaving students, parents and policy makers with little information about “which institutions do a better job than others not only of graduating students but of teaching them what they need to learn” (US Department of Education, 2006, x). The Education Secretary has since embarked on amendments to the US Education Act to make the quality assurance system more accountable to the public.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) completed its first cycle of audits in 2007. I have long been a critic of the Australian system because it did not begin by focusing on its broader role to assess “the quality of the academic activities, including attainment of standards of performance and outcomes of Australian universities and other higher education institutions” or “the relative standards and outcomes of the Australian higher education system and its institutions, its processes and its international standing”. Rather, it chose in the first cycle to concentrate on a measurement of the adequacy of processes for ensuring quality.

AUQA reports are published on its website, but if one were wanting to discover whether academic standards were being achieved it would be difficult to discern it from the reports; nor could the reader gather any intelligence on the relative performance of institutions; and nor could one establish whether they were performing well in an international context by reference to the performance of their peers.

The previous Minister for Education, presumably reflecting public concern, decided in 2006 that she wanted the second cycle to concentrate on academic standards and outcomes and academic risk – the new Minister, who took up her post at the end of 2007 confirmed this focus.

Given the approach taken in the first cycle, institutions have been left ill-prepared for the second cycle, because they have no foundation upon which to build the answers to the new questions. The first three reports under the second cycle demonstrate how difficult the task has been for auditors and there is little improvement in enabling lay readers to establish the relative quality of an institution.

In its *Guide for the Second Cycle Audits* AUQA has indicated that it is important to close the loop between processes and outcomes, and it seems to be asking the right questions (AUQA 2007, 8.3.2), but it might have been more effective had it tested the new measures and gained both agreement as to their validity and prepared the public.

Having argued since the establishment of the Australian quality assurance regime that we needed to focus on outcomes and standards, I welcome this change, although it would appear to have been driven by external forces and the new system has therefore begun with little preparation. AUQA is now working to develop standards, having established an Advisory Group for the purpose, but even this has been overtaken by the recent review of higher education that has effectively acknowledged that the quality assurance system has not produced the intended results, being too focused on inputs and processes, and recommended that it be replaced by a new structure that will assess standards and outcomes in an international context. The new system is proposed to also include an accreditation and re-accreditation structure for all higher education providers (Australia, 2008, 115-139).

### **Quality Assurance for Whom?**

Quality assurance has been conducted largely for an internal audience. Even international rankings have had the effect of further focusing institutions on their standing in a competitive market for honours rather than a competitive market for student outcomes.

So answering this question is complicated by the number of stakeholders involved. One is clearly the public and the other is students. The final two are institutions concerned about their autonomy and Quality Agencies which can sometimes take on a life of their own by seeking to demonstrate that they are good policemen with high levels of compliance. These interests do not necessarily coincide.

The literature on quality assurance is replete with examples of insiders talking among themselves rather than engaging with the public, governments or students. While this may be justifiable in developing appropriate and rigorous measures because these are ultimately technical questions in which the public has no interest, it is crucial that universities engage with the public to ensure that the system will meet its needs.

The starting point for any quality assurance system should be that society has a right to know whether its institutions are capable of meeting its expectations (see for example Australia, 2008, 115). Its primary interest is knowing that 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. The public will also want some

means of distinguishing one institution or programme from another. It wants to know that in a period of globalisation, when the transportability of qualifications is crucial, the qualification will be recognised as comparable in standard from one country to another. It is therefore incumbent upon institutions to report to society in a way that is comprehensible to it.

Quality assurance mechanisms must respond to the public interest to know what universities do. That does not mean that universities should not insist that they are the best judges of quality, and that they do it well, but they cannot go on to say that the answers will probably be equivocal or incomprehensible to the uninitiated. If there is a difference of opinion about methodologies between institutions wanting to protect their autonomy and students wanting public accountability through frequent inspection at the level of the programme or qualification, ways should be found to accommodate the wishes of students (ENQA, 2007, 12).

The question of institutional diversity has become important as more students with a wider range of skills have entered higher education, and with the accompanying concern that standards might have fallen in order to accommodate them. Institutions which have taken as their mission an explicit concentration on teaching and access are often asked to indicate whether they have added value to their students to a level that will enable them to graduate with comparable qualifications to those graduating from more traditional universities. There is good evidence to suggest that those systems that have encouraged a diverse range of institutions have been successful in attracting more students from under-represented groups in society. In some countries there has been a deliberate policy to retain or to re-introduce binary systems to enable higher education to serve different national objectives through institutional diversity while giving parity of esteem to different institutional missions.

While developing clear measures of accountability and standards, care will need to be taken not to inadvertently produce a homogeneous system of higher education, in which all institutions are aspiring to international research status because that is the indicator for success. An approach that values and encourages diversity while maintaining minimum standards will provide incentives to institutions to achieve their missions while retaining their individuality and serving the diverse needs of their students. The quality assurance system must be capable of assessing such institutions in ways that do not create disincentives to the continuation of their distinctive approaches.

While institutions will be distinguished by the degree to which they are able to deliver above the benchmark, the public will be assured that all higher education institutions will at least deliver the benchmark level. A teaching and learning international rankings index could thus be a measure of standards indicating which institutions are performing at the threshold and which above it.

### **Alternatives**

There are several models to achieve what has been argued in this paper, so I will concentrate on the essential features that should form the basis of any system.

An effective system of quality assurance should -

- make a difference to students – both through the value that has been added and the

- measurement of outcomes;
- be owned by the institutions and accepted as valid by them;
- be relevant to the purposes of higher education;
- promote diversity;
- be a cyclical process rather than a series of sporadic snapshots;
- address the question of standards;
- be conducted by national and international peers;
- be conducted at a subject or programme level;
- contain international comparative measures; and
- be reported in terms that are easily understood by a lay audience.

As Elaine El Khawas and her colleagues (El Khawas *et al*, 1998, p.16) have also indicated, the quality assurance system should identify the general competencies and skills that should characterise holders of a degree, regardless of where or how they earned the degree, it should define a set of international standards for student achievement for each profession and discipline, and institutional capacity should be based on international standards and review teams.

At discipline level there will need to be measures that assess the comparability of standards based on a system of subject reviews like those in the UK. At the programme level there will need to be an assessment of whether the combination of subjects have the effect of producing a comparable set of skills to lead to a degree of a standard that is comparable internationally, probably along the lines of the Swedish system. At the institutional level the task will be to assess whether the institution has a combination of objective measures that can determine whether the institution as a whole is meeting its objectives, and its mechanisms for mitigating risk.

Quality assurance should be about ensuring that internationally acceptable standards are being met and that every institution meets a threshold level of quality across its courses. This will involve discipline level rather than whole of institution reviews. It will require the development of standards and the definition of outcomes.

The attachment to the 2008 OECD Education Ministers' statement provides an indication of the complexity of the question of defining outcomes, so this will be a large task. Nevertheless when I have approached the question of standards and outcomes by trying to define the qualities of a history graduate to see whether these might reflect the qualities we would wish to see in a graduate in any discipline I have found that the particular can be generalised (Massaro, 1998).

A history graduate should obviously know the craft of history, its methodologies, and have a sufficient breadth of historical knowledge to judge historical events in their context. In order to practise the craft, the history graduate must be able to find information, analyse and interpret it critically, report it dispassionately, and express it in lucid and appropriate language.

This definition contains in microcosm the range of essential qualities that tend to be used to define a university graduate – a knowledge of the relevant specialisation, the capacity for independent thinking, marshalling and expressing thoughts effectively, searching for truth, valuing facts and distinguishing them from opinion, questioning received wisdom, creating new knowledge.

These generic skills are taken to have been acquired by having passed the examinations for the degree, but it could be made more explicit by ensuring that when assessing students, the process will include both a test of their specific discipline knowledge and the more generic skills and qualities. The alternative would be to move to an additional exit examination, as has been proposed by the OECD Ministers.

I have previously argued for a super-ordinate exit examination for all students and suggested that the circle would be complete if appropriate entry level tests could be introduced to measure progress in the generic skills as well as determining through normal subject examinations that the student had achieved competence in the relevant disciplinary area (Massaro, 1998).

The task of setting subject standards in the UK over the past decade has led to a series of subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2008). These are aimed to “set out expectations about the standards of degrees in a range of subject areas and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject”. They aim to “set out clearly the academic characteristics and standards of UK programmes”, with some combining professional standards required by external professional or regulatory bodies. They are also aimed at providing prospective students and employers information on the nature and standards of awards in a subject area. The QAA has also begun discussions about the benchmarking of Masters level degrees, so there is much to be learned from that experience.

But any testing to measure outcomes must be compulsory for all graduates. Australia has developed a voluntary graduate skills test, but few graduates take it, and it is still a snapshot rather than a measure of progress.

The OECD’s work on developing an assessment of higher education learning outcomes to allow comparison between higher education institutions across countries will provide the second major arm of a new quality assurance system (OECD 2008a). But while this task is already a large one, it would benefit from being expanded to include the development of standards. The result of this expanded brief would form a basis for measuring quality that is transparent to both institutions and the public. The success of this enterprise is of crucial importance to higher education but it must be done well and quickly, requiring multinational collaboration that will ensure that governments do not resile from the task simply because it will not produce instant solutions.

## **Conclusion**

For whose benefit do we conduct quality assurance and what is the right balance between the needs and expectations of society and the autonomy of institutions? This paper has argued that while institutional autonomy must be preserved, this will best be achieved if higher education responds to society’s needs and expectations. Ultimately quality assurance is being conducted for the benefit of society.

While the quality assurance systems being used in several countries vary in methodology and intent, there is a growing international perception that they are not performing the task that the public and its governments expect. There is a need for the public and students to be

assured that the standard of degrees is both guaranteed and internationally comparable so that graduates can move easily between countries as their careers develop.

This paper has argued that higher education has been slow to realise that it must address these issues in a way that is comprehensible to society rather than through technical solutions that can only be appreciated by those inside higher education.

Higher education is uniquely placed to develop the measures and metrics that will ensure that this need can be met and should take the initiative to do so rather than rely on externally imposed solutions that will not meet its needs, not be consistent with the purposes of higher education, and probably endanger its autonomy.

It is now urgent that the metrics be developed to measure standards and outcomes using some valuable examples as starting points. However, because this work must be conducted in an international context it is proposed that the OECD project on outcomes measures be expanded to include standards as well as outcome measures. Recognising that such change is difficult even within countries, there will be a need to provide both institutional and government support to ensure this task can be completed quickly.

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