Can institutional evaluations help higher education institutions?

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ENQA Quality Seminar
Tromso
December 2002
Overview

- Explore impact issues
- Quality processes and how they relate to conceptions of quality
- Evaluations/critique of external quality processes
- Evidence, methodology and politics of quality
- Conclusion: Are we making progress?
Quality evaluation

‘Evaluation’ is an umbrella term for all forms of quality monitoring, assessment, audit, legitimation, endorsement or accreditation. It also includes standards monitoring.
Impact?
Concerns

At the INQAAHE Conference in Santiago (1999), opening keynote, I expressed concern about:

• the impact that quality processes have on higher education;

• the extent and nature of (independent) evaluation of external quality evaluation.
Impact

- More work for all involved in external evaluation (return on effort?).
- More documentation (but better?, for whom?).
- More information (right sort?).
- Clearer vision (for managers?).
- Greater accountability (about what and to whom?)
- More compliance.
Impact (2)

- Better regulation of the sector?
- More efficient institutions?
- More accessible? (open access, fees?)
- Better research?
- Better teaching?
- Improved standards of student attainment?
Quality processes and link to quality?
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<th>Approach</th>
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<td>Object</td>
<td>provider</td>
<td>programme</td>
<td>learner</td>
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<td>Focus</td>
<td>governance &amp; regulation</td>
<td>curriculum design</td>
<td>learning experience</td>
<td>medium of delivery</td>
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<td>content of programmes</td>
<td>financial viability &amp; processes</td>
<td>qualification</td>
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<td>document analysis</td>
<td>stakeholder surveys</td>
<td>direct intervention</td>
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Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some ‘higher-level’ skills. Implicit normative gold-standard against which to measure academic performance. Elitist presupposition that there is a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards.

Quality evaluation processes include standards monitoring, e.g. external examiners, reputational indicators (league tables), employer recruitment preferences, research evaluations (RAE). Accreditation also acts as a background monitor of the exceptional quality of academic standards.
Evaluation (external)

**Approach**
- accreditation
- audit
- assessment
- external ex

**Object**
- provider
- programme
- learner
- output

**Focus**
- governance & regulation
- curriculum design
- learning experience
- medium of delivery
- student support
- content of programmes
- financial viability & processes
- qualification
- admin support
- organisational processes

**Rationale**
- accountability
- control
- compliance
- improvement

**Methods**
- self-assessment
- PIs
- peer review
- inspection
- document analysis
- stakeholder surveys
- direct intervention
- proxy delegate
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Standards monitoring
Accreditation
Assessment (L or R)
Audit/institutional PIs
Customer surveys/feedback

Quality

traditional
perfection
fitness for purpose
value for money
transformation

Value added:
- enhancement and empowerment of the learner
- fitness for purpose
- value for money
Transformative learning

CRQ

- Accepting
- Engaging/Questioning
- Understanding
- Rote
- Reconceptualising

Transformative learning
Nature of evaluation
Evaluation of evaluators is mostly unsystematic. Two broad types:

1. Opinion, predictive or theoretical analyses using existing (anecdotal) data [OLD].

2. Analyses that are based on systematic data collection [NEW].
Evaluators

1. Self-evaluation.
2. External evaluations initiated internally — sometimes using consultants as ‘friendly’ advisors.
3. Independent evaluations initiated and undertaken by an individual, research centre or organisation, as one-off studies or as part of a research programme into HE policy.
Purposes

A. Feasibility studies, evaluations of pilots or modifications to an existing process.

B. Evaluations of effectiveness of quality process (ability to deliver the ‘underlying rationale’).

C. Fundamental review of impact on the sector.
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<th>Independent</th>
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Evidence, methodology and politics of quality
Evidence

- Statistics
  - Dubious provenance
  - Convenience measures
  - Poorly operationalised
  - Conceptually invalid

- Verbal/written testimony
  - Action
  - Intention
  - Opinion

Beware ‘facts’
Facts

• Naïve objectivism
• Theory-related nature of observation
• Evidence linked to theory
• Clear epistemology -- or at least a clear link to a specified concept of quality
  – (fitness for purpose as an escape clause)
Epistemology

• Positivism
  – explanations: cause and effect

• Phenomenology
  – interpretation: meanings

• Critical (dialectical)
  – understanding, situated
Methodology

• Causes
  - inferred
  - data as objective, unambiguous
  - statistical relationships

• Meanings
  - ‘customers’, ‘choice’
  - data as indicative; surface scrutiny (linked to expectation)
Dialectical understandings
- context dependent: historical, structural
- totalistic
- abstraction
- data deconstruction/reconstruction
  - semiotic; critical hermeneutic; structuralist; dialectical processes.
Politics of quality

The ‘politics of quality’ refers to the macro and micro agendas that accompany the introduction of quality monitoring procedures. ... Alvesson & Willmott, (1996, p. 11), suggest that the achievement of quality in higher education ‘is essentially political in origin’. The politics, though, are concealed behind a facade .... Thus, any evaluation of evaluation systems needs to unravel the politics of quality. Equally, there is also a need, as in any social science, to explore the values and political agendas of researchers as well as those who commissioned the research.
Conclusion

Do we
• seriously evaluate the evidence we use and the nature of the epistemological enterprise in which we are engaged?
• use naïve models of impact?
• confuse effectiveness of process with impact on the sector?
• Continue to ignore the politics?
• really address the affect on student learning?
Factors impacting on the student experience of learning

Source: Adapted from Horsburgh, 1999, p. 22
Thank you

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