Quality Assurance as the Evaluation

of Educational Experience

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"Quality Assurance" is an all-embracing term, used to include

all the policies, processes, actions and mechanisms

through which

the quality of Higher Education is recognised, maintained and developed.

Quality Assurance can be reduced to two basic questions:

'Could X be better?'

'Is X good enough?'

**In terms of Education,
X = the provision made for the student to achieve, or even surpass, the intended learning outcomes.**

In Higher Education the learning outcomes are of the kind we have been discussing -

but we should remember that it may always be possible to achieve even more if the provision made for their achievement can be improved.

One of the commitments entered into by Croatia when it signed the Bologna Declaration is:

"Promotion of European co-operation in Quality Assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies".

The development of national Quality Agencies in Europe increasingly emphasises the **improvement** of the quality of Higher Education provision as the important goal

- even when formal accreditation decisions are a by-product of the process.

Who should ask the questions:

'Could the provision made for the student to achieve, or even surpass, the intended learning outcomes be better?'

'Is the provision being made good enough?'

As understood in the European Higher Education Area, Quality Assurance needs to be

grounded in a university's recognition of its own *corporate responsibility* for the quality of the educational provision made for its students.

Quality Assurance can best be seen as:

- a collaborative process
- devoted to optimising quality
- within the constraints of resources etc

and extending upwards from

- the student experiencing his or her own education,
- to the self-evaluation of the individual professor through
- corporate responsibilities and accountability at different institutional levels,
- up to a national body

At the most fundamental level each concientious professor will be asking him or her self

'Could I do what I am trying to do better?'

Such a professor will exercise objective self-criticism and will also listen to the students. Whether or not recognized as such:

this is Quality Assurance

Usually there will be some improvements possible which are in the individual professor's hands alone, and

- **with attention to what the reality of the students' experience is**
- **and some imagination about how their learning outcomes might be better supported,**
- improvements can be effected.

Quality Assurance implies an outcome, it is not an end in itself –

the most worthwhile outcome is improvement.

Other problems are likely to be identified which ca
only be resolved in collaboration with others,

- at the next most basic level, this will be
collaboration with the others who are involved in
the delivery of the programme of studies.

All of those staff (including learning resource staff and technicians) involved in the delivery of a programme of studies should see themselves as a team,

and should seek to resolve issues and develop improvement in the quality of the programme of studies through debate and ultimately consensus agreement.

The programme team is the most basic level at which one can identify **corporate responsibility** for the quality of the provision made for student learning.

Within an institution QA and corporate responsibility go together.

Such a process at the programme level is neither easy nor conclusive, and requires leadership.

The crucial role of programme team leaders requires recognition within the wider institution.

Responsibility implies a measure of autonomy (freedom of action) and also implies accountability.

- Accountability to students and other stakeholders, but also accountability within the university structures.

As well as meeting together on more mundane and specific matters,

the members of a Programme Team should, from time to time, deliberately and collectively ask themselves the question:

'Could we do better?'

As well as asking themselves the question they should also listen to what the students are saying:

Questionnaires are valuable (particularly if designed in conjunction with the students), as are student representatives, but simply talking to students is important.

If students' declared needs cannot be met they should always be told the reasons why.

Programme Teams also have an opportunity to exercise more systematic forms QA procedures -

particularly if they have appropriate administrative support.

They can **monitor** at least the following as **performance indicators**:

- The demand for the programme (the ratio of applicants to available places).
- Student success in examinations.
- The retention of students (as against the proportion who drop out, and **if possible the reasons for the latter**).
- What happens to graduates.

Trends from year to year are important (and can give rise to questions which need answering), but **targets** can also be set and the success in meeting them monitored.

The programme team, through the Programme Leader, will need to negotiate on behalf of the interests of the programme – at the institutional levels capable of effecting those improvements which the Programme Team cannot itself effect.

Typically that will be at the next level of corporate responsibility (e.g. the Faculty)

The next level of corporate responsibility (e.g. the Faculty):

is responsible for ensure the quality of all its programmes of study and is accountable to the University

(the corporate identity of the latter being represented by Senate rather than the Rectorate)

– as well as to other stakeholders (students, graduates, employers, peer groups, etc)

The Faculty should exercise Quality Assurance (possibly involving peers from elsewhere and consulting stakeholders).

Basically it should ensure that the Programme Team is asking itself the right questions and taking appropriate decisions .

While this may be a formal procedure (beneficial in encouraging objectivity), that should only be a framework for a two-way and open dialogue.

This dialogue should again have a place for the student voice.

QA procedure at the Faculty level should equally provide **an identification of real need**,

some of which needs the Faculty itself may be able to meet,
while some may require the Faculty to negotiate at the University level.

But the fact that it is the outcome of an objective Quality Assurance process should strengthen the Faculty in its negotiations with the University.

The University's position in relation to its Faculties is comparable to the Faculty's position in relation to the Programme Team.

There is a University responsibility to ensure the quality of the provision made for students, both through an appropriate form of QA (which might be focused on the way in which the Faculty exercises its responsibilities)

and

through the University itself realising its responsibility to provide for confirmed needs

- through its planning and resource allocation

As at every level within the University, the University should itself demonstrate its accountability to its stakeholders, including external stakeholders.

'Quality Promotion Units' - example:

The London School of Economics' Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office (TQARO)

Part of the Academic Registrar's Division

- Supports the Senate's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee (TLAC) - which meets regularly to report to Senate on matters of teaching quality assurance and keep them under review.

- Supports the periodic reviews of educational provision in departments, conducted on behalf of TLAC (including helping departments to prepare for review and ensuring that follow-up action is taken.)

- Prepares statistical data for departments on their teaching and learning performance, as essential background for monitoring and review.
- Organises questionnaires of student opinion of teaching at the School
- Supports Departments in the preparation of short accounts of individual programmes, with particular emphasis on aims and intended learning outcomes.
- Liaises with the LSE's Teaching and Learning Centre. See http://teaching.lse.ac.uk/
- Is responsible for seeing that External Examiners' reports are processed within the School and that departments respond to them.

- **Supports the sub-committees of Senate which consider new programmes and modifications to existing provision.**

- Maintains the School's internal codes of practice, in conjunction with the relevant committees.

- **Advises the School on its quality assurance strategy, including in relation to the external context.**

- **Liaises with the QAA as the national body which carries out institutional and subject reviews in fulfilment of statutory requirements.**

- **Takes the lead in preparations for the Institutional Audit conducted by the QAA**

Maintains a website as a main source of information on quality-related matters.

www.lse.ac.uk/collections/TQARO

External Quality Assurance:

Institutional and/or subject/programme

Evaluation: i.e 'Could it be better?'

and/or

Accreditation: i.e.'Is it good enough?' - through

evaluation and/or compliance

The standard pattern of national Quality Assurance in Europe:

- The establishment of a central national agency.
- Internal evaluation and the preparation of a self-evaluation report (or programme plans).
- External evaluation by a panel of experts (peers), organised by the agency, which includes
- a visit to and discussions at the institution.
- Publication of the results of the external evaluation.
- Checks made on any necessary follow-up actions by the institution.
- Evaluations recurring on a cycle, typically every five years.

It is essential that evaluation is an academic not a bureaucratic process.

• Articulation of conclusions and their justification before one's peers is the paradigm of the academic process in research.

• It should be an analogous process for peer evaluation as part of a Quality Assurance process.

Many means are employed to try to ensure that the judgments resulting from an evaluation are defensible and consistent (i.e. objective)

It has become general practice to seek to ensure the following:

- The process is structured – ***although open***.

- Factual inputs (data) are unambiguous and correc

and

- efforts are made to ensure that all panel members are in possession of all the relevant facts.

- The members of the panel are chosen for their appropriate knowledge and understanding of the kind of institution (or programme) being evaluated, including being aware of current developments in the appropriate field.

- Panel members who would otherwise be appropriate are excluded if there is anything in their background which might be considered liable to prejudice their judgement.

- Efforts are made to ensure that all panel members understand the principles of the evaluation process, often through prior training.

- The members of the panel are allowed to exercise their academic judgement,

- but are guided by a professional and experienced member of the Agency staff,

or

- by a Chairman who is carefully selected for his/her suitability and experience and is given further training in the role.

- ***Students are consulted separately***

– although their input will not determine the outcome until the staff have been given an opportunity to respond to any adverse student comments.

- The judgment and the resulting report reflect *a group decision*, if at all possible one based on consensus. (The panel accepts a corporate responsibility.)

- The panel's general conclusions are reported orally, before it leaves the institution.

- The institution can challenge the report in draft, on the grounds of factual inaccuracy

"Accreditation":

a technical term which denotes the granting or confirmation of a status.

In Higher Education it can be applied to institutions

    or to fields of study

    or to individual programmes of study.

(The accreditation of academic awards normally means that either the institution or its programmes of study have been accredited.)

If Accreditation is not based on peer evaluation then it will be referenced against a set of predefined criteria which must be met.

It can therefore be a purely bureaucratic process, checking conformity to a Law or other form of prescription, and in these terms is usually the responsibility of Ministries of Education.

Accrediting programmes in terms of checking conformity to standardised norms has many associated problems.

(a) By whom and how are these norms to be established?
(b) How are they kept up to date?
(c) How can one judge how well the curriculum will actually be delivered?
(d) Academics will have less commitment to a curriculum imposed on them, and this lowers the quality of the delivery
(e) It would mean that universities may not be devising curricula which reflected their own strengths.
(f) It reduces the diversity of choice open, at least potentially, to students, and the element of competition between universities.

The accreditation of universities only makes sense if they have both the autonomy and corporate nature necessary for them to be fully accountable for the quality of the education being provided to all their students.

While the situation in Croatia is due to change the realisation of the full implications will still be some way ahead.