

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Tom Boland

There is a broad consensus globally of the value of education to social and economic development. Higher education in particular plays a crucial role in creating culturally vibrant and democratic societies. Higher education and research, and the outcomes they produce in terms of well-educated graduates, a capacity for innovation and new knowledge, play crucial roles in the economic development of all our societies. So we can agree that well performing higher education institutions, accessible to all who can benefit from higher education and graduating high quality graduates is a worthwhile objective for all of us.

Given this central role of higher education in our lives, a key issue for higher education institutions, governments and policymakers is how to ensure quality outcomes, in the teaching and learning mission of institutions and in their research mission. For graduates quality outcomes will determine their life chances and the success of their careers; for governments, that have invested valuable and usually scarce public resources, they expect a good "return" from their investment in terms both of well-educated graduates, knowledge transfer and innovation; for societies, their social and economic development depends crucially on the quality of educational outcomes. Quality, and its assurance, is also key to the accountability relationship between higher education institutions and the governments who fund them and regulate them in the public interest.

What is "quality"?

One of the great difficulties in discussing quality and quality assurance is to find a shared understanding of what is meant by the term "quality", in contrast with the relatively easy task of defining other measures of institutional performance. What do we mean by quality; how can it be measured or assured and who needs to agree on the definitions and the measures to be employed?

Rather than trying to coerce all stakeholders into an agreed definition of quality a more pragmatic and ultimately more impactful approach is suggested - allow that quality means different things to different people depending on their perspective and context. For the student a quality higher education experience is one which prepares her or him for life by supporting personal development. For academic staff quality lies in their capacity to generate new knowledge and to transmit that knowledge effectively to the wider world through their students as graduates. For governments, quality outcomes are those which ensure the most efficient generation of knowledge and its transfer, especially into economic activity. For employers quality rests in the skills and competences of graduates as employees. For society, to take a broad and wide encompassing category, quality outcomes from higher education include all of these as well as the dynamic that quality higher education generates towards creating better places to live that respond to human needs, socially, culturally and financially.

Quality assurance as quality enhancement

If quality means many different things to different people, does this render the task of quality assurance an impossible tangle of conflicting aims and objectives? Not so for a number of reasons. First, fundamental to quality assurance is a focus on quality improvement or enhancement. Quality assurance needs to have as its animating spirit one of support and

improvement, not fault finding and regulation. An ever present danger with quality assurance systems that adopt a quality audit approach is that this will kill the very thing it seeks to promote by smothering it in red tape, box ticking and bureaucracy. A quality enhancement approach, on the other hand, offers the prospect of constantly improving standards of performance.

The higher education institution as primary arbiter

Secondly, while all stakeholders have an interest in the outcomes of quality assurance processes, only one is in the key position to determine those outcomes - the institution itself. It is the institution, acting within its proper sphere of autonomy that decides (or should decide) on the internal allocation of its resources; that hires staff, mentors them and assesses their performance; that admits, teaches and graduates its students. It is a fundamental principle in the Irish higher education system, and in many others around the world, that the primary responsibility for creating a quality learning experience for students, for quality outcomes from teaching and research and for quality assurance is the institution itself.

But this is not to disenfranchise other stakeholders - in particular governments and of course students who have the keenest interest in quality outcomes and in ensuring those outcomes are achieved. Government's interest arises from its role in promoting the public interest and as a substantial investor of public funds on behalf of the wider public. Achieving a balance between autonomy and accountability is respect of quality assurance, as well as other aspects of the operation of a higher education institution, is key to a successful relationship between governments and higher education institutions. The role of government, therefore, is to ensure that institutions do that which they are morally and legally obliged to do - and not to try to do it for them, or do it to them. In other words there should be a clear statutory delegation of responsibility to HEIs to put in place appropriate OA processes and the responsibility of the government is to ensure that such process are in place; that they meet best international standards; that they are fully operational and that they are effective in the constant drive towards quality improvement.

Ireland

Taking Ireland as a case study for quality assurance, it reflects this approach. As a matter of Law and practice, primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the higher education institutions. The public interest is supported through the role of a special statutory body, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the focus of which is on quality enhancement, rather than detailed micro-regulation of the institutions and their processes.

Taking the wider context in Ireland, the Higher Education Authority is at present leading a process of reform that will see a re-orientation of the regulatory regime for higher education away from a focus on inputs to a focus on outputs and outcomes. Quality, its assessment and assurance, will be an important performance indicator in an approach that will see an increasing alignment of public funding with national objectives and a clear relationship between public funding and institutional performance.

Role of Students

Students must play an important role in OA processes. They, after all, are most directly impacted by what higher education institutions do. For that reason alone statutory provisions relating to OA should specifically mandate the involvement of students. In addition many

countries find surveys of students a useful way to determine the quality of the higher education experience from a student perspective. In Ireland we have developed such an instrument which will be provided as a national student survey from next year with direct feedback to HEIs. A similar approach has been initiated in Ireland also in the past year with respect to employers.

So all the key stakeholders (institutions, government, students and employers) can and should input into the quality assurance process, each with a clear understanding of the role of the other and all with an appreciation of the importance of the autonomy of the institution to take primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of its core activities in teaching and research.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

Working through academics across the higher education sector the Higher Education Authority in Ireland has recently overseen the establishment of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The Forum will be the key system-level infrastructure for the enhancement of teaching and learning in which the HEA will direct system-level investments in teaching and learning in the years ahead. Building on past collective endeavours, the Forum will serve as a national platform for academic-led enhancement of teaching and learning.

A key objective of the National Forum will be to foster the integration of high-quality research with the mission and practice of teaching and learning. Within this context, the Forum will have a vital role to play in advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning to ensure that teaching practice in Irish higher education is informed by up-to-date and relevant pedagogical research. It will aim to support innovation and experimentation across the sector at the frontiers of international 'best practice', and to facilitate the development of an open eco-system for scholarship in teaching and learning for the academic community.

Quality vs. resources

Returning to the main theme - quality - this is a complex concept. One of the proxies often employed is the resource per student in a university or college.

While all can appreciate that there is some relationship between the quality of outcomes in higher education and the quantum of resources applied to achieve those outcomes, the relationship is certainly not a linear one and is in practice poorly understood. This issue has assumed greater importance as countries move towards mass higher education with the funding implications that that carries for both government and students. Added to this in recent years has been deep recession in many of the more developed economies.

This is an area that is poorly researched. A conspiracy theorist might say this stands to reason since the very people who would research it, academics, are the very people who might have most to lose if research showed poor correlation between the level of resource available to universities and the quality of outcomes. But conspiracy aside, failure to better understand the issue could lead to one of a number of undesirable outcomes. Either governments yield to the consistent calls from institutional leaders for more investment and risk wasting always overstretched public resources on over-funded programmes; or in those jurisdictions where students carry a significant portion of the cost of their higher education they leave college

burdened with Loans that bear no relationship to the earning power of their degrees; or, conversely, governments do not respond to demands for resources, demands that cannot be met by students and the quality of outcomes is damaged. This latter is probably the worst of all possible scenarios since once quality suffers it is very difficult to undo the damage on the ground or in reputation.

International ranking systems

The quest for instruments that can measure quality outcomes in higher education has led to the development of international ranking systems, or league tables. The problem with such rankings are not the ranking systems themselves or indeed their developers and compilers, but the way in which the rankings are used - by universities, governments and the media, to mention the main culprits.

By far the most perverse response to such league tables of universities is for a country to set out to invest so as to try to ensure that a chosen one or two of its universities achieve top ten, or any other "top" ranking. In doing so, it is suggested, a country runs the risk of impoverishing its higher education system as a whole, maybe even its entire education system, for the chimera of a prize which even if achieved (and that's unlikely) is unlikely to deliver the benefits expected. This is true even in the wealthiest of societies. The approach adopted in Ireland, and currently being robustly implemented by the HEA is to create a high quality system of mission specific diverse HEIs well-co-ordinated and aligned with national objectives, funded so as to sustainably ensure quality outcomes in a mass higher education system. The focus is on what Ireland needs from its higher education institutions, not what an international ranking system will measure. If, as an outcome of this policy, any of our universities is ranked first, tenth, one hundredth, or whatever that is fine but it is not an objective.

AHELO

Another project, which initially promised a great deal more than ranking systems was AHELO - the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes. In an environment where international league tables were unchallenged drivers of public policy for higher education this OECD project offered the prospect of a much broader method of comparing performance in higher education institutions across jurisdictions. A five year feasibility study has proved disappointing however.

The study has brought benefits in terms of bringing a renewed international focus on the importance of learning outcomes in the participating institutions and in the minds of students and staff and it has demonstrated that technically it is possible to mount an international survey in this space. Those countries that participated have also benefitted through the impact of this focussed dialogue on learning outcomes, and assessment methodology in their institutions.

However, there remain deep concerns regarding methodological aspects and, in the view of many, intractable challenges associated with developing a common set of standards. There is also concern and confusion, over the purpose of the exercise - whether it should be a high-stakes accountability tool versus a low-stakes developmental or self-improvement mechanism - a conflict reflected earlier in my remarks that go to the heart of what quality assurance processes should be. And how would AHELO fit into the ecosystem of existing

instruments with similar objectives and avoid survey fatigue on the part of students and staff. Above all, after five years of significant investment and considerable effort by many admirable people we still have no clear answer to some key questions on future costs and likely benefits of the project.

All things considered, it now seems unlikely that the project can deliver on its initial promise. We should pocket what learning and benefits we can from the work-to-date either at national or international level and move on.

U-Multirank

Another project with somewhat similar objectives is the EU promoted U-Multirank project. U-Multirank is a very different form of ranking, and indeed in my view it is a misnomer to call it a ranking system at all. Not only is it a misnomer but it runs the risk of discrediting what could be a very useful instrument, by its association with the more contested international ranking exercises.

The key potential strength of U-Multirank is the capacity it gives to universities and colleges to benchmark their performance against comparable HEIs. It allows comparison of performance not only in research, but also in teaching, knowledge transfer, international orientation and regional engagement and as such it is a multi-dimensional instrument. It does not produce league tables; neither does it aggregate the performance of universities in different activities into a composite score. It presents performance profiles for universities across the five dimensions using a broad range of performance indicators. It provides these performance profiles at two levels: for the institution as a whole; and at the level of different disciplinary fields (initially mechanical and electrical engineering, business and physics). U-Multirank uses publicly available information (particularly on research performance) and data from national sources wherever possible as well as information supplied by participating institutions.

A key feature of the U-Multirank webtool is that it enables users to specify the type of institutions they wish to compare (in terms of the activities they are engaged in). Users can then decide which areas of performance to include in the comparison of the selected group of universities; in this way U-Multirank produces personalised benchmarking of HEIs.

Participation in U-Multirank provides potentially significant benefits to higher education institutions.

- Visibility internationally of performance profile and in the disciplinary fields in which it is active.
- This performance profile is accessible via the interactive web-tool to a wide range of stakeholders: internationally mobile students (and their parents); academic staff and other higher education institutions seeking partners; business and industry with particular R&D or professional education needs etc.
- The HEI can compare and benchmark its performance profile on a wide range of indicators with other institutions with similar institutional profiles within the European Higher Education Area and beyond, and can identify potential partners for cooperation.

It is a project to be watched with interest as it is rolled out.

Conclusion

Quality outcomes from higher education are the objective of all stakeholders. Quality assurance processes are key to such outcomes and are a central element in the accountability of HEIs to those stakeholders. Such processes also go to the heart of the autonomy of HEIs. Finding the correct balance between that autonomy and accountability is the essence of an effective, synergistic relationship between higher education and Government. Four principles of approach are suggested -

- The higher education institution has primary responsibility for ensuring quality outcomes from its programmes and all its activities;
- The appropriate role for government is to ensure that the HEI takes its role seriously and puts in place the processes necessary to best guarantee such outcomes;
- Such processes must include students at their core and other stakeholders as appropriate;
- The focus of quality assurance processes should be on quality enhancement, avoiding the trap of bureaucracy and box ticking;