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## Where next for university teaching improvement? What the Scottish example of quality enhancement has to offer.

*Vicky Gunn*

Just before the cataclysmic First World War, a former University of Iowa president, George Edwin MacLean, visited Great Britain. His goal was to observe the impact of university reforms in England and Scotland, and to identify beneficial suggestions relevant to the improvement of American universities (1). Whereas many twenty-first century commentators erroneously conflate the (now) different UK university sectors (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) this is a criticism that cannot be said of MacLean. Indeed, he was quite clear that the Scottish higher education sector had a unique identity. For him, this was expressed through certain 'national characteristics', including: a four-year degree cycle that mixed specialism and generalism; an education as much focused on the pragmatics of social mobility and work as the loftier ideals associated with the writings of Cardinal Newman; and with a sense of collective, national endeavour rather than a dominant emphasis on individual prowess. This perception of a 'democratic intellect' seemingly running through Scottish higher education is something in which the sector has maintained pride, at least in public rhetoric (2). Yet, it has changed in ways directly comparable to the rest of the UK. Of particular relevance here are: the identifiable implicit and explicit institutional clusters, and the growth of multiple academic career pathways through the diversification of employment contracts.

What stands in stark contrast to England, however, is Scotland's continued commitment to a quality process focused on enhancement rather than just assurance of learning and teaching. This is superior as both:

- an institutionally relevant programme of action (which respects cluster differentiation and institutional autonomy);
- and as a collaborative improvement venture across the whole sector, rather than just an audit process which overly privileges procedural checks.

For Scottish quality approaches, the orientation has been towards prioritising activities of a specific, nationally determined, educational nature, with assurance providing a ubiquitous 'back-story'. Since 2004, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been directed to a schedule of enhancement themes including employability,

integrative assessment, research-teaching linkages, graduate attributes, flexible learning, and developing the curriculum (3). To foster a collaborative culture, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Scotland facilitates a steering group with representatives from each of the Scottish HEIs. This reports directly to the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), which is composed of Vice-Principals of teaching and learning as well as student representatives from all of the Scottish HEIs. Arguably, this approach to pursuing national quality enhancement provides:

- Firstly, a gentle, practical, but effective restructuring of standardised and often reductive audit cultures (and, in this sense, a counter-cultural challenge to neoliberal interpretations of education);
- Secondly, a horizontal driver of learning and teaching that cuts across the verticality of disciplinary specificity (which has grown increasingly dominant as a result of changes to the scale, generation and dissemination of research);
- Thirdly, an enforced context of collaboration between institutions in an environment where competition within and across clusters has become an apparent norm.

In this it is the functional successor, at least in aspiration if not universality, to the ideological heritage of Scotland's 'democratic intellect'.

The trouble is, the themes now seem too localised and disconnected from wider demands on our institutions. Put together, escalating complexity in disciplinary/subject knowledge creation and curation; heightened awareness of student needs both domestically and internationally; and the potent paradoxes created by globalised higher education, necessitate a mixed enhancement 'ecosystem' that brings local teaching arenas into conversation with the bigger picture. These trans-institutional issues cultivate a sector-wide tension. Effectively, they require some integration of research, teaching, community service (knowledge exchange and social cohesion), and leadership at the same time as specialised careers emerge to enable universities to fulfil the demands now being made of them.

The nature of the enhancement themes raises the profile of worthy topics within general education. It is, nevertheless, hard pushed to confront growing polarities in the various cultures which create the universities' inner dynamic. As structured oppositional positions emerge, tensions created by these will promote pragmatic (and not always systematically planned) resolutions. These resolutions may well close some of the contradictions, but will likely be achieved through concretising hierarchies of status within the institutions. This is especially the case in relation to academics as being either individual elite researchers or members of scholarship-informed teaching teams. In cultural capital terms at least, within our universities educational enhancement is likely to become the preserve of the latter group which will parochialise it further.

Some of the bigger concerns now needed to underpin quality enhancement themes are:

- The relationships between research, education and fostering social cohesion in increasingly inter-cultural arenas – particularly how teaching and learning can be enhanced to encourage productive harmony between these links;
- Joined-up thinking between practitioners and scholars doing and researching institutional graduate attributes' advancement through disciplinary study, and researchers informing our understanding of both learning cities and rural regeneration;
- Moderating the tendency for universities to see student representation in the functioning of our universities as best achieved through identifiable 'student experts' rather than a process centred on inclusion across all aspects of learning, teaching, research and organisational management;
- Teaching as a location for cultivating Scotland's next generation of leaders as well as fostering an export market of our students, predominantly but not exclusively, to the South East of England;
- Building robust systems for driving transnational education enhancement imperatives that manage the tensions of a national agency overseeing development in other nations.

It is clear Scotland's experience with enhancement themes offers the global university sectors something of depth and strength, but to truly grow, the process needs to mix both local institutional needs and global priorities.

## References

1. MacLean, G.E. (1917) *Studies in Higher Education in England and Scotland: with suggestions for universities and colleges in the United States*. Dept. Of the Interior Bureau of Education Bulletin, 1917, no. 16. Reprinted by General Books LLCTM, Memphis, USA in 2012.
2. See Foreword by Lindsay Paterson to Davie, G. (2013, 3rd edition) *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Centuries*, Edinburgh University Press.
3. See the Quality Enhancement Themes website for case studies, outputs and presentations: <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/> . For critical reflection on the QET see: Land, R. & Gordon, G. (2013). 'To See Ourselves as Others See Us': The Scottish Approach to Quality Enhancement. In *Enhancing Quality in Higher Education: International Perspectives*. Land, R. & Gordon, G. Routledge.

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