Quality Assurance and Management in Higher Education

(not How Quality Management will improve Higher Education)

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Introduction

Concerns about the standards of higher education, particularly teaching, are of long standing. Students, their parents, schools and future employers, as well as governments as policy-makers and funders – in other words, the full range of stakeholders, as they would be termed today – have always had an interest in the standard of university and college teaching. With the massification of provision and participation, this concern has understandably become stronger, and for the last few decades has been re-badged as a concern with quality.

Here we discuss two related responses to this contemporary concern, quality assurance and quality management. These may be seen as different positions along a spectrum of increasing concern and response, with quality management further along the spectrum than quality assurance; though some would argue that the latter is simply a sub-set of the former (Manatos, Sarrico and Rosa 2017), while others use the terms interchangeably. There are also other variant terms in use, such as quality control and quality enhancement, but here the focus is on the research literatures examining quality assurance and quality management.

I will look, in succession, at the origin and meaning of the terms, as they are applied to higher education, their application and practice, the issues and critiques that have been raised, before reaching some conclusions.

Origins and Meaning

Rhoades and Sporn (2002) date the idea of quality assurance in higher education in the United States back to the formation of the oldest of the six accrediting bodies: 'the New England Association of Schools and

Colleges, founded in 1885; the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, founded in 1887; and the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools' (p. 359). The advent of quality management, a direct transfer from business and commerce, was much more recent:

> Quality management came to U.S. higher education in 1991 in the form of variations of Total Quality Management… A 1995 American Council on Education survey found that 65% of campuses reported TQM/CQI activity. In addition, El-Khawas found that from 1988–1995 the proportion of institutions involved in assessment rose from 55 to 94%. (Rhoades and Sporn 2002, p. 361)

American universities, which experienced mass participation earlier than elsewhere, had, however, engaged with strategic management practices since at least the 1960s.

In Europe, the application of quality assurance practices, through the use of external examining, dates back even further than in the USA, 'perhaps as long as the history of the universities themselves' (Warren Piper 1994, p. 21). A fuller engagement with quality assurance and management came rather later; from:

> the mid-1980s, quality control mechanisms like independent quality audit standards and units were being created in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands… the discussion of quality assurance was related to limitations of public expenditures and demands for greater accountability in higher education. It also was related to governmental policies introducing more self-regulation into higher education. The aim was to enlarge institutional autonomy and improve institutional performance. (Rhoades and Sporn 2002, p. 363)

Rhoades and Sporn identify somewhat different causes for the adoption of quality management practices in the USA and Europe:

> these practices emerged in the U.S. through both mimetic and coercive processes of isomorphism, in which higher education was influenced by private sector and state government practices. In Europe the same mechanisms operated through different structures: multinational business was a source of mimetic isomorphism (e.g., TQM); and national government, with New Public Management, was a source of coercive isomorphism. Those were supplemented by the influence of U.S. academics effected through professional mechanisms – normative isomorphism. (2002, pp. 382-383)

Williams (1993) dates the adoption of the particular doctrine of total quality management (TQM) within higher education as being virtually simultaneous in the USA and the UK: 'It seems to have occurred spontaneously in a number of organisations in the United States and the United Kingdom in response to growing financial pressures on higher

education institutions that, during the 1980s, increasingly found themselves being required to behave like commercial enterprises in a fiercely competitive market' (Williams 1993, p. 229).

Just as there is disagreement over what quality means when applied to higher education, so there is variation in the use of the terms quality assurance and quality management:

> Management and quality in higher education are each broad and slippery concepts. Statements about quality, management and the relationship between them need to be examined carefully to establish their context, purpose, frame of reference, authorship, and the criteria and yardsticks which are being used. (Cuthbert 1988, p. 67)

In part, of course, as Manatos, Sarrico and Rosa (2017, p. 159) argue, this is due to a resistance on the part of academics to being 'managed':

> There seems to be an aversion to the word 'management' in much of the literature dealing with higher education (HE). As a consequence, even when the literature on public services addresses QM [quality management], it tends to use a different terminology. HE in particular habitually refers to QM as 'quality assurance', which is rather odd for QM research, as it reduces the scope of QM to its assurance component.

Application and Practice

Research and writing on quality assurance and management in higher education has been widespread and extensive. A search carried out using Scopus (on 11/7/18) found 1606 articles with the words 'quality', 'higher' and 'education' in their titles, taken as an indication of a close focus on the topic. While there were hardly any such articles published before 1970, by the 1990s the research interest had taken off, stimulated and supported by the development of specialist journals such as *Quality in Higher Education* and *Quality Assurance in Education*, as well as by more generic journals such as *Total Quality Management* that were not solely concerned with education or higher education.

There have been more than 100 articles with the words 'quality', 'higher' and 'education' in their titles being published per year since 2010. Interestingly a particular focus on quality assurance seems to be more popular than quality management, with 274 articles with the former in their titles identified compared to 163 of the latter (see Table 1).

Steinhardt et al (2016) identified 1610 articles on these topics published in the period 1996-2013. Their analysis identified four clusters of publications, and confirmed an overarching tension between focusing on management or on education:

two distinct strands of research on the quality assurance of teaching and learning became evident and emphasized an antagonistic tension in the research. First, the management strand in the Quality-Management-Cluster and Student-Evaluation-of-Teaching-Cluster comprises all aspects of quality assurance. This management strand is in tension with the education strand of research prevalent in the Assessment-Cluster and Quality-Cluster. Especially in the Quality-Cluster, the management and steering logic of quality assurance are criticized.

Research on quality assessment has focused on many countries, including Australia (Harman 2001, Shah, Lewis and Fitzgerald 2011, Vidovich 2002), China (Cao and Li 2014, Huang 2014), Colombia (Rubaii and Bandeira 2018), Croatia (Currie, Krbec and Higgins 2005), the Czech Republic (Kohoutek et al 2018), Ecuador (Rubaii and Bandeira 2018), Egypt (Schomaker 2015), Ethiopia (Semela 2011), Finland (Ala-Vähälä 2016), Germany (Bornmann, Mittag and Daniel 2006, Seyfried and Ansmann 2018, Seyfried and Pohlenz 2018), Ghana (Ansah 2015), Greece (Stamoulas 2006), Hong Kong (Law and Meyer 2010, Mok 2000), Italy (Barnabè and Riccaboni 2007), Japan (Yonezawa 2002), Kenya (Odhiambo 2014), The Netherlands (Enders and Westerheijden 2014, Segers and Dochy 1996, Teelken and Lomas 2009), Oman (Carroll et al 2009), Portugal (Kohoutek et al 2018), Russia (Motova and Pykkö 2012), Singapore (Mok 2000), South Africa (Luckett 2007), Spain (Marciniak 2018), Sweden (Nilsson and Wahlen 2000), Taiwan (Chen and Hou 2016, Hou 2012, Hou et al 2015, Hsieh 2016), Turkey (Billing and Thomas 2000), the United Arab Emirates (Ashour 2017), the UK (Brown 2013, Filippakou and Tapper 2007, Hodson and Thomas 2003, Teelken and Lomas 2009) and the USA (Welsh and Dey 2002). As well as the obvious cases for English language publications – Australia, the UK and the USA – this includes examples from all six continents, in addition to a strong representation from Europe.

Other studies of quality assurance in higher education have examined Europe as a whole (Damian, Grifoll and Rigbers 2015, Gvaramadze 2008, Haug 2003, Hendel and Lewis 2005, Hsieh and Huisman 2017, Kohoutek 2014), where the development of the European Higher Education Area has had a particular impact (Kohoutek et al 2018); as well as other continents or regions, such as Latin America (Lamarra 2009), South East Asia (Umemiya 2008), the West Indies (Gift and Bell-Hutchinson 2007), developing countries as a whole (Lim 1999) and OECD member countries (Bernhard 2012). There have also been a number of comparative studies, examining the experience of two or more countries (e.g. Kohoutek et al 2018, Rhoades and Sporn 2002, Rubaii and Bandeira 2018, Yokoyama 2010), and studies of international quality assurance agencies (e.g. Blackmur 2008, Brady and Bates 2016). Researchers have also focused on particular types of higher education, such as online provision (Marciniak 2018).

Billing (2004), in synthesizing comparative studies of quality assurance, detects the existence of a common or general model, incorporating both developmental (e.g. quality enhancement, contributing to planning) and judgmental (e.g. accreditation, public accountability) elements, while recognising forces of both divergence and convergence:

> a 'general model' of external QA [quality assurance] does not completely apply in all countries, but… most elements of it do apply in most countries… In each country, there may be specific additions of elements or omissions from the model, but more usually there are modifications or extensions of elements rather than their omission. These variations are determined by practicalities, the size of the HE [higher education] sector, the rigidity/flexibility of the legal expression of QA (or the absence of enshrinement in law), and the stage of development. (p. 133; see also Van Vught and Westerheijden 1994)

Research on quality management in higher education, by comparison to quality assurance, seems less widespread (Tari and Dick 2016). Examples may be identified from Australia (Holt et al 2013), Greece (Papadimitriou 2011), Hungary (Csizmadia, Enders and Westerheijden 2008), Ireland (O'Mahony and Garavan 2012), Malaysia (Sohail, Rajadurai and Rahman 2003), The Netherlands (Kleijnen et al 2011), Pakistan (Asif et al 2013), the UK (Becket and Brookes 2008, Billing 1998, Kanji, Malek and Tambi 1999, Sutcliffe and Pollock 1992, Watkins 1997) and the USA (Aly and Akpovi 2001, Burgar 1994, Grant, Mergen and Widrick 2002, Horine and Hailey 1995). Tellingly, perhaps, most of those identified from the UK and the USA focus on total quality management.

A lot of this research, however, consists of single institution case studies, with only limited engagement with theory. Thus, a study of 19 articles on the topic published in *Quality in Higher Education* concluded that:

> quality-management approaches can be described as quite heterogeneous; either by studying or reporting from a single case study, advocating the possible transferability of the findings from one institution or setting to another. Very few studies try to build their analytical and theoretical frameworks on extensive literature reviews, close examination of research in the field or by developing or building upon more established theories or perspectives. (Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker 2010, p. 46)

In comparing the practice of quality assurance and quality management in higher education, there is a sense in which academics are generally prepared (even if grudgingly) to accept quality assurance, with the promise it offers of recognising and improving what they do, while resisting quality management as something alien imposed upon them by others:

> the 'total' integration of QM in HEIs [higher education institutions] does not yet seem to be a reality. It appears that the QM field is still often

treated as a separated field, run by a separate department within HEIs, and is not yet an integrated part of the organisation. (Manatos, Sarrico and Rosa 2017, p. 171)

Issues and Critique

Unsurprisingly, both quality assurance and, in particular, quality management, have been the subject of regular and sustained critique. One common criticism of quality assurance is that the results do not justify the considerable investment of time and effort in the process (Leiber, Stensaker and Harvey 2015). For example:

> Studies of academic staff perceptions about the impact of quality assurance in universities indicate that it has had little or no impact on curriculum, teaching quality or student learning. At worst, quality assurance has served only to increase the time and cost associated with bureaucratic requirements within universities and diverted attention away from the core processes of teaching and learning. (Houston and Paewai 2013, p. 262)

Indeed, even if it were feasible to link a particular quality initiative to improved student learning, this might be neither cost-effective nor particularly useful:

> rigorous (quasi-) experimental proof that a quality instrument has increased student learning… may be not only technically challenging and very costly but also not the most effective way to develop optimal quality assurance mechanisms and encourage quality education. (Beerkens 2018, p. 283)

More typically, however, the process largely ignores the actual or potential impact on students, and on whether quality assessment leads to them engaging more in their learning:

> determinations about the quality of university education are often made without information about whether students are engaging with the kinds of practices that are likely to generate productive learning and about whether institutions are providing the kinds of conditions that, based on many years of education research, seem likely to stimulate such engagement. Despite its value, information about what students are actually doing at university is largely ignored in discussions about the quality of university education. (Coates 2005, p. 35)

The reason for this lack of impact may be that quality assurance processes have, until now, largely focused on accountability and efficiency, rather than on the enhancement of provision (Brady and Bates 2016); though others (e.g. Filippakou and Tapper 2008, Gvaramadze 2008) have detected progress in that respect.

Another concern has been that quality assurance procedures are standardized – 'one size fits all' – and often ignore institutional diversity, typically by focusing on the characteristics of elite universities (Skolnik 2016). Similar problems occur internationally in cross-border higher education, where the quality assurance practices of the providing institution, typically from a western country, are seen as taking precedence (Hou 2014, Lim 2010, Ramirez 2014, Stella 2006, Stensaker and Maassen 2015).

Finally, an underlying criticism of quality assurance is that it is an element of managerialism (or, in other words, is little distinguished from quality management):

> QA [quality assurance] regimes continue to spread and occupy a central place in governance approaches to the regulation of higher education around the world… however, QA regimes are not benign managerial instruments – they must be understood as part of a broader series of agendas associated with neo-liberal policy prescriptions that valorize market rationality. Of itself, this is not a new observation. It is, however, not an observation that is frequently made and typically not in the context of university administrators who, in adopting such practices and ideational approaches to the management of research, teaching and funding activities are transforming university operating environments. The sense in which these practices enhance quality in terms of standards of academic excellence, scholastic rigour or the academic achievements of students and their learning, however, is typically a matter of conviction rather than evidence based policy determination. (Jarvis 2014, p. 164)

Much the same criticisms may be made, of course, of quality management. For some, this is because of a dissonance between the principles of quality management and how they are put into practice:

> With a few exceptions of those academics who appreciated the clarity and high standards of control, nearly all respondents feared and dreaded the consequences of increased emphasis on quality assurance…. The general opinion is that quality management in its current shape and character does not suit the individual academic, neither their teaching nor their research. While the respondents are not so much against the general idea of quality management (or performance management and measurement), they dislike the manner it is being carried out. (Teelken and Lomas 2009, p. 272; see also Hoecht 2006)

Similar conclusions have been drawn with regard to total quality management practices:

> despite the special features of higher education as a set of activities based on the creation and dissemination of knowledge and

> understanding… the main themes of TQM, continuous quality improvement, consistency of quality, staff (and student) participation, meeting customer needs, coordination, and management procedures which detect poor quality and stimulate good, all have a significant contribution to make to the development of efficient and effective mass higher education systems and institutions, whether or not they are explicitly market oriented. (Williams 1993, p. 229)

In this case, however, the resistance from academics has been both stronger and continuing:

> The adoption of TQM practices into universities continues to be slow and controversial among the academic community. Some academics view TQM as a new management fad that does not have universal application, while others see it as a major paradigm shift. (Cruickshank 2003, p. 1164)

For others, the jury remains out, and part of the problem is – as with quality assurance - the lack of systematic evaluation (Leiber 2018).

Conclusions

The explicit adoption of quality assurance and quality management techniques within higher education are, perhaps, the clearest example of a direct transfer of practices from business and commerce. They also represent another example of higher education practice and research that has rapidly spread worldwide from its original uptake in the USA and other English-speaking countries. It is no surprise, therefore, that they have been widely critiqued as an example of spreading managerialism, and yet another symptom of creeping neo-liberalism.

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Table 6.1: Number of Articles with Quality, Quality Assurance or Quality Management and Higher Education in their Titles, by Date

Date	A	B	C
2018+	77	16	8
2017	135	15	11
2016	142	27	11
2015	109	22	5
2014	124	25	12
2013	109	21	10
2012	88	9	13
2011	102	21	13
2010	101	17	14
2009	74	15	10
2008	60	9	7
2007	45	8	5
2006	43	12	1
2005	41	11	3
2004	33	10	3
2003	25	2	5
2002	28	8	2
2001	22	2	2
2000	18	3	1
1999	20	1	3
1998	23	2	3
1997	19	2	3
1996	25	3	3
1995	37	5	4
1994	22	3	1
1993	21	4	6
1992	12	1	1
1991	5	-	2
1990	7	-	-
1980-1989	27	-	1
1970-1979	7	-	-
1960-1969	5	-	-
Pre-1960	-	-	-
Totals	1606	274	163

Notes: search carried out using Scopus on 11/7/18.

A – 'quality' and 'higher' and 'education'

B – 'quality' and 'assurance' and 'higher' and 'education'

C – 'quality' and 'management' and 'higher' and 'education'