

DOES QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMUNICATE QUALITY NEEDS? THE
IMPACT OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S DISCUSSION PAPER
"QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION"

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"QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION": DOES QUALITY ASSURANCE
COMMUNICATE QUALITY NEEDS?

Peter Baldwin the Federal Minister for Higher Education has proposed in the discussion paper 'Quality in Higher Education', the implementation of quality strategies in the tertiary sector. The Government's paper is similar to work currently being carried out in the United Kingdom. The aspect driving this change is that of Quality Assurance. Is Quality Assurance related or compatible with the idea of quality education in the tertiary sense? This paper presents; (1) a review of the Government's paper "Quality in Higher Education", (2) comparisons with the English experience and (3) the process required to maintain a flexible, intellectual education system. It then addresses the question, "does assuring quality produce the best process for the fostering quality education within the University environment?"

INTRODUCTION

Never before has higher education been under such an onslaught of pressure, from such a variety of directions. The university sector is being molded and shaped by these forces with little input or involvement in the process.

In the past we would have expected statements from sagely old Dons and complex argument on the need for the construction of a philosophical sound framework on which to base the change process. This is not forthcoming from the professorial ranks of our institutions. Instead the sacred halls of knowledge are under the direction of Captains of Industry, Public Servants, Politicians, and Old Trade Unionists (eg The Finn Report & Mayer Committee)

In the midst of such large scale reform which include; Firstly, the reduction of the binary system through amalgamation. Where the concept of 'big is economically rational' has replaced 'small is beautiful'. Secondly, the generation of Competency-Based Standards a mechanism that will set pay scales and control industry training standard. These standards will be expected to lead to university entrance thus giving them academic credibility. Eventually even the universities will be forced to fit within levels 7 and 8 of the eight point competency scale. This drive for core skills training is challenging the long term accepted belief that universities are a seat of higher learning and knowledge creation. Under the new systems we could see academic degrees replaced with high level skills based courses. In the confusion of all of this we now have the push for QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION the grand plan for the assurance of performance in all facets of university life.

WHAT IS 'QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION'

The Higher Education Council (1991,P6) defines the concept of quality in the following way 'Fitness for Purpose' and has moved away from other defining processes. The HEC approach is "towards describing the attributes that graduates should acquire when exposed to quality higher education - in other words, to describe the qualities of an outcome". The Higher Education Council has complete faith in the concept of measuring outcomes and states clearly that process is of no issue. Nor is there a need for the clarification of the concept of attributes.

The traditional management concept of quality is a broad and detailed field of study that has enjoyed a wide range of support over the last 5 years in this country. In many cases this support has been detrimental to the Quality Movement. Various industries, the tertiary sector may be seen as one of these industries have latched on to Quality Management as a quick fix solution to either the current economic down-turn and or poor management. A striking

example of this misuse of quality is seen in the down

sizing of organizations. This creates reduced employment opportunities and greater work demand for remaining staff. The often presented explanation for this is that the organization has developed a flatter management structure relying on greater employee participation. These isolated aspects of quality management are then presented as a complete quality programme. This is of course not the case as the previous aspects are as much a complete quality management programme as a decapitated human is alive. The above approach is not only dead but it has no soul to provide it individually and no mind with which to solve problems creatively.

In reality the following is a realistic way for the development of quality as a true and successful way of structuring an organization. Duncan & Van Martre (1990, p3-9) state that Deming's view of quality is more than a philosophy it is a 'new religion'. "Deming's system required a mental revolution rather than sophisticated techniques ..." (Duncan et. al.1990,p6) Deming uses three areas within the organization to implement; these are responsibilities of top management, management of human resources & management of production. This is a far more complex concept than that expressed by the HEC.

Before extending the argument on what is quality management and the ways in which is used and misused within organizations, the meaning of quality must be understood. The concept of quality itself is not singular in definition and here lies a start to the issue of managing quality.

Juran (1988, p2.2) addresses the difficulty in quality definition's by including two definitions in his " Quality Control Handbook", these are:

- "1. Quality consists of those products features which meet the needs of customers and thereby provide product satisfaction.
2. Quality consists of freedom from deficiencies."

Crosby (1979) also includes two statements in attempting to come to grips with the definitions of quality. In fact the concept of quality definitions is placed under great scrutiny by Crosby where he not only challenges traditional definitions but alludes definitional process

as a core reason for the difficulty some quality programs encounter. Crosby's solution is to classify quality as "conformance to requirements" (1979, 14) or "fitness for use" (1979, 44).

In the Australian setting Kevin Foley (1989,p1) expounds the following, " Quality is not a tangible, measurable characteristic described by the engineer, designer or manufacturer; it is a perception and therefore a wholly subjective value of the customer or consumer."

Of these, the Higher Education Council appears to have opted for the Crosby approach, in its first instance. It is the HEC that Baldwin the Federal Minister for Higher Education cites in the publication 'Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990's' (1990, p30) as responsible for the formulation of a working definition of quality in higher education.

OTHER COUNTRIES APPROACHES TO QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

At this stage there are four documented approaches to the application of Quality Management in higher education. In the USA the following three institutions have adopted this general approach, Fox Valley Technical College (Spanbauer, 1989), Oregon State (Coate, 1990) and University of Wisconsin - Madison (Williamson, 1992). The Americans have followed the Deming/Juran/Crosby approach of Total Quality Management. This approach to quality is based on the concept of continuous incremental improvement and the use of quality teams.

However the British have followed a different path to the development of Quality in higher educations. This is the adoption of quality assurance, an approach directly influenced by the European Common Market and in adherence with the ISO 9000 series of Quality Standards. Compliance with these standards will be required before identities will be permitted to trade within this market block. Trade in higher education is also believed to be effected by this ruling. In response to this, Sandwell College (Collins, Cockburn, & MacRobert, 1991) has been provided with 100 000 pounds over two years to establish ISO 9000 accreditation, through the development of a Quality Assurance System.

AUSTRALIA IN COMPARISON TO THE REST OF THE WORLD

The United States approach appears to have had little impact on the Australian Governments approach to Quality in higher education. As with Dawkin's approach to the restructuring of the University sector it is to the British system that we have turned. Baldwin (1990,P3) states the following;

"Nonetheless, given the scale of the structural reorganization of the system, and the rapidity of growth, it is appropriate for the government to implement measures specifically designed to provide a degree of QUALITY ASSURANCE at both the institutional level and for the higher education system as a whole. This is particularly important now that a majority of OECD nations already have or are establishing such arrangements and the Australian higher education system is becoming increasingly internationalised."

Baldwin (1990,P3-4) continues this line with the provision of funding for the following 4 major areas:

1. the establishment of quality management mechanisms,
2. a National Centre for Teaching Excellence,
3. the HEC to explore the characteristics of quality in higher education
4. the establishment of a national quality assurance structure, independent of Government, responsible for reporting and commenting on the adequacy of quality management arrangements at the institutional level,

From these indicators it is the Government's desire to provide \$70 million in 1994 in new money for institutions that have meet the above performance levels.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Before expanding the above concepts it is necessary to further define the quality assurance process. As an introduction to quality assurance, Pall (1989) suggests the primary aim of quality control is to measure outcome

goals, then set targets can be met.

Both Juran (1979) & Pall (1989) see quality assurance as a system of checks and balances that attempts to match the organization's actions and outputs to the mission statement and policies. QA is seen as a way of providing confidence to those involved that the process is meeting its quality functions. This confidence is obtained through acting out a series of audits across the system under consideration. Its application is linked to the use of the 'tools of quality' that are the basis of quality control.

The HEC (1992, P13-15) puts forward further evidence for the impact of the British approach of quality assurance on the Australian system through the section of its report titled 'Monitoring Quality: Assuring All Stakeholders'. Here it states "OECD Governments have implemented strategies which provide assurance that due processes of self-evaluation for quality were indeed being undertaken in universities.

This section of the HEC's report goes on to explore the need for quality assessment. It highlights further the British Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) example of an "Academic Audit Unit charged with monitoring the quality assurance procedures being undertaken in universities; surveying graduates and employers from time to time concerning the quality of graduate outcomes; and seeking international assessment of

the quality of the graduates from British Universities."(HEC 1992, p13).

At this stage it is clear that the original statement from the HEC that outcomes and outcomes alone will be measured is redundant. It is obvious that the Government's approach is systems based.

THE USE OF QA IN COURSE DESIGN: THE SANDWELL EXAMPLE

Stepping back from the global arguments used above an example of the use of QA that will be more applicable to most of us is that of course design. In its simplest and most effective form QA does three things:

(1) it analyses the process involved in an activity,

- (2) it then documents these processes in a QA Manual,
- (3) then allows these documents to be upgrade as the processes are refined.

Figure 1 shows the adoption of the industrial/manufacture approach to the QA process. The 18 points in this table form the basis for the design of the Quality Assurance System. Figure 2 shows how these 18 points are used in course design. Most of the aspects of this system are familiar to us as they are the basis of good course design practised by any reputable university.

THE MISUSE OF QUALITY MANAGEMENT

The above example is a reasonable application of Quality Assurance. In reviewing the Government's and the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee discussion papers some disturbing factors arise. The first of these is expressed in the AVCC report (1992, p75) where it is clear that quality of academic staff will be measured through staff appraisal. This paper states "increments will, in future depend upon staff meeting accepted criteria for advancement in the incremental salary structure." (AVCC, 19919, P75) This is in direct odds with the quality philosophy as expounded by its father Edwards W Deming.

When looking at the fourteen points as outlined by Deming, (1986, p24) point ten states "Eliminate slogans, exhortations, and targets for the work force asking for zero defects and new levels of productivity..." Point 11 develops point ten by stating "Eliminate work standards (quotas)... Eliminate management by objectives. Eliminate management by numbers, numerical goals."

Deming does not stop at fourteen points. In the five deadly diseases found in business he again voices his objection to boundaries, guideline's and targets. Within these diseases we find performance appraisal, merit ratings, and annual reviews of performance.

The second point expressed by the AVCC on the same page is that of student evaluation. It is stated "students are effective evaluators of the educational processes they undertake". (AVCC 1992, P9) While student feed back is useful in the design and delivery of courses it is only one aspect of Teaching evaluation. In fact the broader

question of learning rather than teaching should be the centre of the argument when investigating education at tertiary level.

The statements from the AVCC, Baldwin and the HEC linking money to performance are also very much at odds with the principles of quality. All these approaches fall into the quick fix basket rather than the long term improvement process. It is approaches like this that lead Crosby (1979,p69) to write the following. Quality is not best obtained through conformity to goals "you can never make much by simply "assuring" or "controlling". He goes on to say "... it is possible to make an excellent living actually doing the job of quality rather than just auditing to find out why it wasn't done."

SHOULD TERTIARY EDUCATION BE STANDARDIZED

This is a very important question in the whole argument of the role of QA in tertiary education. As explained previously QA is a system where by processes are identified and documented. This approach to management works well in industry, manufacture and so on but there is no hard evidence to support it as a successful management tool in higher education.

What the application of QA to higher education does suggest is that all courses of a similar nature are generic and that there is no need for individual difference across institutions. This approach is at odds with the existing philosophies, as it is individual difference that generates demand for courses and allows the diversity required for scholarly growth.

It is my belief that QA is not an appropriate system for managing quality in a the academic component of the tertiary sector. QA may well suit the various support and technical areas within universities but it lacks the flexibility for use in the academic arena.

AN ALTERNATIVE PROCESS TO QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Deming produced the concept of a quality wheel. This has been refined and called the 'PDCA' cycle. Imai (1986, p60-65) explains the aspects of this 4 stage process as:

1. the gathering of data and through its evaluation
generating a plan,
2. implement the plan (do),
3. check the process,
4. and action any changes that reduce error or
problems within the original plan.

The difference in this approach to that of Taylorism is that the PDCA cycle is owned by the person responsible for the process (Hutchins, 1990 p50), in this instance the academic.

The PDCA cycle is traditionally linked to quality assurance as shown in Figure 3. QA provides a documentation process for the system so that effective changes in the process are recorded and therefore not lost over time. This stops the system from decaying.

The difficulty with this traditional approach is again the nature and type of documentation associated with the quality assurance component of the model. As stated earlier QA is regulated by standards, these standards specify a lengthy and involved reporting procedure. This is not an effective method of defining the educating or research process of a university.

For the PDCA cycle to work effectively it will be necessary to develop a different process to QA. The process replacing QA will be an optimum communication method.

This new quality communication process will have to meet the following 4 criteria:

1. provide enough information to understand the process,
2. present this information in a clear and precise fashion, thus ensuring that the process does not become cumbersome,
3. be generated in a way that stimulates the PDCA cycle and thus the improvement process,
4. have flexibility, as tertiary education does

involve paradigms, paradigm shift is not linear
and the QA approach is linear.

The combination of the new quality communication with the PDCA cycle will not only provide all involved with a quality product but used in an optimum way will stimulate new approaches to old problems.

CONCLUSION

The tertiary sector is confronted with having to address the quality debate. At this stage few academics have addressed this problem and this places us in the position of having to except systems adapted from elsewhere. In the present situation this appears to be the British model.

It is clear that quality in higher education is very different in nature and concept to that of quality in industry. However the present approach sees universities being pushed and shoved into fitting this model; a process in itself that is at odds with quality management.

The alternative is to look at the work of Deming and others as they provide analytical methods that well suit higher education. It is in the area of communicating quality concepts, approaches and outcomes in higher education that existing quality management theory falls short. Therefore if we are to be proactive it is the role of the academics to accept the challenge and design an effective quality approach for higher education that meets it unique needs.

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