A Case of Competing Interests: Quality in Higher Education

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The 1990s have seen the emergence of 'quality' as an issue in higher education policy and practice. The form this has taken has varied, but can be schematised into two distinct categories: quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI). In this paper we argue that the quality debate is driven by a political and economic agenda. Accordingly, the form quality takes within universities has become a site for struggle over competing ideological and institutional interests. A tension emerges at the institutional level between quality as a measure for accountability and quality as a means for transformation and improvement. In developing our argument we describe a Quality Improvement (QI) project currently in progress at Griffith University to provide an exemplar of how quality improvement may be used to transform and generate new practices while at the same time meet the demands of accountability.

Quality as Political

The issue of quality in higher education is essentially political, and becomes a site for struggle over competing ideological perspectives serving different personal and institutional agendas and interests. As Vroeijentijn (1990, p. 23) argues, 'the interpretation of the concept of quality depends on the person who sets the objectives'. There are various interested parties, each of whom defines quality in accordance with objectives set by themselves. These may run parallel with general policy orientations, but they can also be conflicting. 'The debate over quality in higher education then, should be seen for what it is: a power struggle where the use of terms reflects a jockeying for position in the attempt to impose own definitions of quality' (Barnett, 1992, p. 6). The current debate within higher education regarding quality has focussed significant public attention on what is actually happening within universities with the view to making these institutions more publicly accountable. This public scrutiny may well be seen as encouraging and signifying a cultural shift in terms of how quality is conceptualised. The effect of this is not inconsiderable for if, as Lindsay (1992, p. 161) suggests, '"quality" is to be interpreted narrowly or simply used as a tool to pursue a less welcome goal, then it represents a confusing and dangerous development. He observes that 'unfortunately, some signs point to the latter.' What is becoming apparent is that competing models are being promoted by different interest groups, each of which has its own ideas as to what constitutes quality and how to measure it.

Universities have the twofold task of having to satisfy the multiple and competing demands of external stakeholders while at the same time, maintaining their own particularistic and unique needs and goals. In practice however, the views of centralised bureaucracies within government have a view of quality that is concerned with satisfying the demands of external accountability. In reference to this Peters (1992) claims that:

Underlying the ostensible concern for improved public sector accountability is an instrumental economic rationality exemplified in the now dominant belief in the use of market forces to induce greater efficiency. (p. 127)

While we acknowledge that this view may well hold credence at the level of government policy, it is our contention that practices

to promote quality within Griffith University reflect a view that is concerned with the development and improvement of present and future practices.

Quality as Contested

While quality has become a new force for accountability within higher education there is, however, little agreement as to what "quality" means or how it might actually manifest itself in the organisation and practices of higher education institutions. Depending on whose interests are being served different definitions of quality are advocated.

Interestingly, the attempt to define quality as presented in the HEC document 'Achieving Quality' is neither directive nor instructive. Rather it is ambivalent to the extent that, 'Discussions about the quality of higher education start from the premise that no single, workable 'definition' about quality in possible; that quality in higher education is not a definable concept ...' (p. 6). Despite this suggestion that it is not possible to present a consensual or a singular definition of quality, nevertheless, attempts have been made by a range of authors to come to grips with this elusive concept. Cullen (1992, p. 5) for example maintains:

Quality can mean some normative view of excellence, it can mean a lack of dysfunctions in the academic machine, it can mean orderly inputs and processes, it can mean status relative to colleagues in research and publication, it can mean the quality of the best students and their suitability for higher studies, it can mean

the maintenance of skills and standards that suit various employers and professional groups, and it can mean teaching excellence in terms of knowledge added to students participating in programs. It can be generalised from programs to the overall activities of an institution or to a state or national system.

Harvey and Green (1993) provide a suggestion as to how the problem of the meaning of quality may be resolved. Their suggestion is: 'At best we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken' (p. 28). Pratt (1993) takes an even more pragmatic view maintaining that 'Higher Education scarcely needs more definitions of quality, criteria, questionnaires and three year projects. What is required is that academics should know what they are doing, understand the value of it and do it as well as may be - together with apt institutional means for making this overt' (p. 5). The point to be made here is that in expending a great deal of energy on attempting to provide definitive definitions about the scope and characteristics of quality, crucial questions such as what are the assumptions underlying the various approaches to quality, whose interests do these approaches serve and what are the unintended consequences of the various versions of quality are left silent. With these questions in mind we now direct our attention to identifying two competing models of quality.

Two Competing Models of Quality

Within public debates and policy discourses two competing models on quality are emerging. The two dominant models of quality that we identify in this paper are the instrumental (Quality Assurance) and the transformative (Quality Improvement).

Quality Assurance

The instrumental QA model evident within much federal government policy discourse exemplifies what Barnett (1992) describes as the technicist voice or the production measurement view (Lindsay 1992). In its more severe form this approach is concerned with increased externally driven accountability. One of the reasons for the continuing pressure on universities to justify their existence, according to Green (1993), can be found in the failure of existing quality assurance arrangements.

Within a QA framework quality is treated as a synonym for "performance". It advocates the imposition of technical instruments, such as performance indicators to measure input and

output of educational spending and resources. This instrumental
view of quality validates the use of quantitative measures such
as the numbers of graduates, the number of post-graduate
students, research income and so on as indicators of performance.
Accordingly, it takes as its point of departure the values and
interests of the external world, both as to the purpose of higher
education and as to the means by which quality ought to be
assessed and improved (Barnett, 1992). It could be said that the
recently initiated Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher
Education (CQAHE) (currently beginning its visitations to
universities across the country) may well use such measures in
its deliberations regarding the allocation of reward funds. The
production measurement view is seen to be attractive by some
because quite simply, as Lindsay (1992) argues, inputs are much
easier to define and measure than outcomes.

Several issues emerge as being of concern as a result of the
preference exhibited by bureaucrats for the instrumentalist QA
model. First, the autonomy of the academy comes into question
insofar as instrumentalist approaches make it all too easy for
political interference and manipulation at all levels. Second,
universities that once prided themselves on their independence
and their ability to provide an external voice of critique find
themselves silenced by the possibility of punitive resourcing
actions. Third, the Australian university system that has
credited itself on its diversity may well find itself under
greater centralised control, not only in terms of resource
allocation and programme profile but also in terms of more
stringent forms of externally mandated accountability. The
current situation is such that it is politically naive for
institutions not to develop quality management plans and
initiatives. This is regardless of the fact that quality still
remains a diffuse concept despite the burgeoning number of
training workshops and the proliferation of academic writings on
its ontology and practice. It is chastening that Lindsay's (1992,
p. 162) observation: 'While focussing more attention on important
core issues in higher education, the "quality debate" regrettably
has not generated a conceptually sophisticated and innovative
attack on the elusive notion of quality in higher education'.

The current support QA currently holds serves the interests of
external parties, such as the federal government bureaucracies.
By making universities more accountable to government in all
aspects of their operations, the earlier autonomy of universities
to set their own agendas and goals is now being significantly
diminished.

Quality Improvement

A transformative and developmental view of quality is evident

within some universities. This model employs a notion of quality
that breaks from the bureaucratically imposed functionalist QA

model of quality to escape from the preoccupation with
structures, control and quantitative measures of performance.
This is achieved by giving at least equal emphasis to the
imponderable elements of our concepts of educational processes
and outcomes, and their dependence on value judgements (Lindsay
1992 p. 154).

This transformative model relies on peer review and is concerned
with enhancing the perspectives and interests of the university
internally and is thus favoured by those actually working within
the university. At the core of this position is a commitment that
the experiences of all participants must be enhanced.
Furthermore, as Harvey and Green (1993, p. 25) argue, 'learners
should be both at the centre of the process by which learning is
evaluated and at the centre of the learning process'.
Accordingly, this view of quality bars any outside voices
dominating the activities as they relate to quality within a
university, and empowers the participants by giving them the
opportunity to influence their own transformation.

Quality within a QI framework is future directed and concerned
with the transformation of current practice. Importantly,
improvement occurs because it is seen to be in the best interests
of all staff and is driven by the organisation's desire for
improvement. Accordingly, decision making processes for
improvement are devolved so that all staff are involved rather
than the imposition from above.

As it is driven by the shared goals of employees, QI serves and
responds to the needs of internal stakeholders. Nevertheless,
through the documentation of procedures it can also respond to
the demands of external stakeholders.

Quality Assurance vs Quality Improvement

The two dominant perspectives on quality in higher education
differ in many respects. The instrumentalists promote the view
that quality can be measured so long as the 'right' instruments
are developed. There is an over emphasis on obtaining results
from the measurement of inputs and outputs, with no attempt to
understand the processes that underlie the system. This in turn
provides the basis for identifying current deficiencies and for
rewarding 'good practice'. Primarily it is an external procedure
in which outside agencies find ways of forming opinions and
judgements about the activities of the institution. This
viewpoint is built around an assessment of an institution's past

performance and is circumscribed by economic indicators.
Consequently it is concerned with documenting the past instead of
providing the basis for future policy planning and activity. The
major differences between the two models is summarised below.

	Quality Assurance	Quality Improvement
Intent	accountability	improvement
Philosophy	instrumental	transformative
Locus of Control	external management/government driven	internal driven by employees
Motive	government directives/policies	organisation's desire for improvement
Social Relations	competitive directive	collegial negotiated
Process	top down /bureaucratic	bottom up/facilitative
Management Style	authoritarian	consensual
Administrative Structures	centralised	devolved
Outcomes	evidence of past practice	pathways for improvement
Time	short-term	longer term
Evaluation	external audit	peer review
Audience	external stakeholders	internal stakeholders
Orientation	past practice	future possibility
Indicators of Success	quantitative	qualitative

Table 1
Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement Compared

As Table 1 shows there is conceptual distance between the
purposes of QA and those of QI. In summary, on the one hand, QA
is directed towards proving the value, worth or excellence of a
particular object, issue, programme or set of activities. On the
other hand, QI is directed towards identifying areas for
improvement, as they relate to issues, programmes, processes or
sets of activities. With this conceptual distance, it would
appear at first glance, that there is little capacity to bring
these two competing models into a useful relationship.
Nevertheless, we argue that in the Griffith University project
that it is possible to make the two processes complementary.
Accordingly, if the QI process begins with the mapping of areas
for improvement, it is then possible to integrate that mapping
process through the identification and documenting strengths. The
documentation then serves as the basis for evidence of excellence
to assure stakeholders and other audiences of the strength of
outcomes achieved is possible, with the parallel process of
improvement. In this context, while QA and QI may be
uncomfortable bedfellows, they are able to be brought together in
a practical partnership.

While QA has been a powerful force in directing the activities of
universities, internally driven approaches that are closer to the
needs and interests of the University itself are also evident. We
argue that such a shift is at the core of the activities of the
project concerned with improvement end of quality within Griffith
University. We will now describe this project briefly.

The Quality Management at the Sub-Faculty Level Project

In early 1993 funding was received through the National Priority
(Reserve) Fund: Quality Section, to implement a project entitled
Processes for Quality Management at the Sub-faculty level. The
initial proposal was based on the premise that models of quality
assurance currently applied within business and commercial

sectors are inappropriate for use in higher education. Within the
context of this project, quality in higher education is concerned
with providing a learning context in which students experience
success, teaching that responds to a variety of needs and the
development of academic programmes that provide leadership in new
fields of knowledge and skills. Three sub-faculty groups were
identified and canvassed regarding their interest in
participating in such a project.

In order to implement practices that reflected the intent of QI,

the overall project is premised on five operational principles. First, we acknowledge the need to take into account the national pressures of quality in higher education and that sub-faculty activities had to be embedded within the institutional culture of Griffith. Accordingly, in enacting the project, its processes had to be designed to be contextually acceptable and to complement existing institutional practices. Second, any initiative at the sub-faculty level should have an explicit relationship with both the particular faculty and University Mission, values, goals and objectives. Third, the staff of the sub-faculty groups who have committed themselves to the project must be responsible for the planning, implementation and evaluation of their projects. In keeping with this, the role of the project team is seen to be supportive but facilitative rather than controlling. Fourth, the focus within each sub-faculty group should be on the enhancement of, or change to existing knowledge and practice rather than the application of methods used for quality assurance. Finally, the project adopts a developmental orientation that is reflected in all of its practices rather than a technical rationalist approach that is characterised by a heavy reliance on hard appraisal processes, through which change is bureaucratically mandated and imposed.

Each of the projects is concerned with the development of a 'quality culture' to be internalised in all aspects of faculty life and enacted across all academic and administrative practices and procedures. Accordingly, the aims of the project are:

    i.   to develop practical and on-going methods by which the "quality "   of   particular activities and outcomes can be evaluated;

    ii. to develop strategies and processes that will enable participants to take   continuous planned action by which improvement of practice can be   achieved;

    iii. to provide quick and efficient descriptions of activities which   allow the University rapid access to data relating to the "quality" of its   provision of higher education;

    iv. to disseminate the knowledge and skills developed during the   course of the project to other elements of Griffith University.

The selection of appropriate groups within faculties was an important consideration . The following criteria were used as the preliminary basis for selecting project participants:

    i.   that they were not presently funded for a major project

related to   teaching and learning or quality;

    ii   that at least two of the Faculties should represent
recently amalgamated   campuses where there was commitment to
upgrade qualifications and   programmes but with few resources
available for such improvements;

    iii. that in function, each of the Faculties should be as
different as possible   from each other;

    iv. that the Faculties were willing to offer a commitment
to the project.

On the basis of these criteria the following faculties were
selected to participate in the project: Education and the Arts
(EDA), Engineering and Environmental Sciences (ENS) and the
Queensland College of Art (QCA). After a two day workshop in late
July participants returned to their faculties to implement their
projects. The purpose of the project was to introduce
participants to the philosophy of quality improvement, develop
skills and strategies to facilitate quality improvement
strategies at the sub-faculty level and finally, to identify
specific quality improvement issues to be addressed through the
project. While acknowledging the limitations of describing the
projects in their very early stages we now do so as this provides
evidence for demonstrating that quality improvement strategies
may be used to transform and generate new practices while meeting
the demands of accountability.

The project within EDA is concerned with improving the quality of
teacher education through the development of stronger links
between professional experiences and academic studies leading to
a better understanding of the work of teaching itself. The
project is concerned with developing a programme that is
distinctive from other teacher education programmes in Queensland
through a school-linked internship. By developing new
relationships with the various educational stakeholders concerned
with the practicum, the quality improvement strategies developed
through this project will enhance the University's reputation as
a provider of innovative teacher education programmes. This in
turn will ensure that "quality" entrants will be attracted to
this programme and "quality" supervising teachers will be
directly involved in the professional education of neophyte
teachers.

ENS is concerned with examining the effectiveness and
appropriateness of the model of the Graduate School of
Environmental Sciences and Engineering. The Graduate School was
the first to be established at Griffith University. Its goal is

to be pre-eminent in teaching and research. Since its
establishment in 1991 there has been a major increase in the
numbers of programme offerings from 7 to 11, a doubling of 4 to 8
in the course work area, and in the total number of post-graduate
students from 99 in to 1991 to 305 in 1993.

The overarching aim of the project is to collect information that
provides Faculty input for the external review of the structure
and function of the Graduate School. To this end, the project has
the following purposes: first, to identify the nature of the
model itself, second, to ascertain the 'goodness of fit' between
the initial aims as established in 1991 and the current operation
of the Graduate School; third, to investigate how the model or
concept of the Graduate School is perceived and experienced by
various stakeholders, and finally, to identify the cost of the
Graduate School to the Faculty in terms of resource allocation.
Significantly, the review is not an evaluation of staff (their
qualifications, publications, performance), nor is it a review of
the course structure or individual subjects and their content.

At the time of writing this paper, criteria for the selection of
members of the external panel developed; membership of the
external review panel agreed upon with these members all able to
participate; the terms of references for the review established;

a research assistant has been employed to collate relevant data,
and each of the various elements of the Graduate School have been
allocated tasks relevant to the collection, collation and
analysis of information.

Within the broader University context this project is
particularly important because it provides a model for proposals
for the implementation and development of other cross-faculty
Graduate Schools. This project provides a template for
documenting and reviewing administrative structures and processes
as well as identifying issues as they relate to resource
allocation and the links between aims and implementation.
Accordingly, this project is responding to the demands of
external accountability through its external review, while
simultaneously incorporating quality improvement processes. At
the time of presentation of this paper, the external review team
will have completed their report on the Graduate School.

The Queensland College of Art (QCA) was originally part of the
TAFE sector. The amalgamation of QCA into Griffith has required a
major shift on the part of staff regarding their perceptions of
their roles within the larger University. Two projects are
currently under way at QCA. The first project can be said to be
transformative as it is concerned with image development during a

period of transition. Specifically, it is an attempt to address
the issue of the loss of the old 'TAFE culture' with its emphasis
on practical and technical knowledge, and the development of a
process and mechanism for externally advertising the new
university based QCA. The second project is concerned with
developing appropriate procedures for assessment and evaluation
in the Creative Arts within a University context.

The Image Development project has as its major outcome the
generation of a publicity brochure. This project has required QCA
to formulate and identify clearly its mission, roles and goals.
Being located within a university culture which values a
different set of dispositions and outcomes from TAFE, the project
focusses on the following activities as they impact on the
institution:

    i.   increased importance being placed on post-graduate
education;
    ii. the employability of graduates; and,
    iii. a greater balance between teaching, research, and
professional   activities.

Specifically, the project is concerned with developing and
internalising a 'culture' that for many staff and students is
quite different from what they have previously experienced.
Within the broader ambit of QI, by identifying issues as they
relate to enhancing the image of a reconstituted element of the
University and developing and documenting strategies to
facilitate this, demands exerted by pressures of external
accountability will also be met.

The Assessment Project is concerned with a review of existing
assessment methods at QCA and a comparison with other assessment
methods undertaken within the University. The desired outcomes of
this project are:

    i.   A better understanding of the evaluation of students in
an Artistic setting
    ii. A greater understanding of University assessment
strategies.
    iii. The development of more efficient assessment
strategies.

    iv. The development of policies that would maintain
consistency and   equity of assessment across Artistic
Disciplines.

Again, this project is premised on the belief that by
understanding current practices these practices can be improved.

The process of documenting these improvement strategies once
again satisfies the pressures of accountability.

The three projects will be completed by the end of 1993. DEET
requires that a final report be lodged with them by the end of
April 1994. It is envisaged that this report will provide a model
for facilitating a variety of quality improvement activities
across other elements of the University.

Three general impressions are emerging from the projects
described in this paper. First, given the opportunity to draw QA
and QI into a complementary relationship, academic staff members
support the prospect of following systematic pathways to meet the
evaluative and developmental demands placed on them. Second,
there is a commitment to collegial activity which, although
emerging from external pressures, provides the impetus to have as
its focus particular improvement goals. Finally, while academics
are protective of their autonomy in working conditions, they are
also conscious of the need to respond to policy directives as
they relate to improvement and its documentation.

Conclusion

Quality in its many forms has now come to exert considerable
pressure on the activities of various elements within
universities. Increasing demands are being made on universities
to be publicly accountable which in turn has meant that various
measures have been implemented to satisfy this external scrutiny.
In this paper we have been concerned with distinguishing between
two versions of quality as they are currently evident within
policy and institutional practice. We have argued that quality in
its current QA form is essentially politically motivated. As a
consequence the nature and purpose of universities has come into
question and has been incorporated into public debate. In
practice this has meant the imposition of externally defined
versions of what universities stand for and their contribution to
the economic enhancement of the state. This, we suggest, may not
be in the best long term interests of the various groups inside
and outside universities. While recognising the political need to
endorse accountability measures, we maintain that accountability
should not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, we promote a view
of QI in which both the needs of the various internal
stakeholders are satisfied while at the same time responding to
the external pressures of accountability inherent within QA.
Finally, we see the need to create a balance between the tension
caused by the demands of external accountability as implicit
within QA and the context specific elements of QI. In this
respect we concur with Barnett's (1992, p. 119) position: 'In
higher education, whatever its validity in other contexts, such a
single minded checklist approach to safeguarding quality is

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misguided, ineffective and pernicious.'

The QI project at Griffith University is attempting to bridge
external accountability and internal transformation. The three
projects described within this paper provide evidence to support
this claim. By internalising a culture that values quality in all
of its variant forms and the development of a quality driven
institutional culture across the University, individual practice
will be transformed and external demands to be accountable will
be met.

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