

Quality assurance as support for processes of innovation

The Swedish model in comparative perspective

Högskoleverket 1997

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Produced by the National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket),
Stockholm, January 1997

Högskoleverket Studies 1997:1 S (Högskoleverkets skriftserie)

ISSN 1400-9498

ISRN HSV-SS--97/1--SE

Editor: Lars Niklasson

Graphic Design: Information Department

Printed by AB PP Print, Stockholm, Sweden, January 1997

Preface

Sweden, like most other countries, has introduced mechanisms for external quality assurance in its system for higher education during the past ten years. What makes the Swedish approach different from that of most other countries is the emphasis on improvement rather than control. The aim is to support change and renewal; not only to monitor the present. In other words, it has a dynamic perspective rather than a static one.

Four kinds of quality assurance are organised by the National Agency for Higher Education. Two are variants of accreditation, granting rights to award degrees and to establish professorships at non PhD-granting institutions. These accreditations have had a profound effect by highlighting the necessary conditions for high quality in higher education institutions. Quality assessments are organised to look at disciplines or particular aspects of the educational system on a national basis, with a focus on suggestions for improvement. Quality audits ask for each institution's concerted efforts to improve its activities. While accreditation is necessary as a minimum standard for public funding, none of the others are directly tied to funding decisions by the government.

The design of quality assurance in Sweden is based on a consensus between the government and the higher education institutions. The latter have accepted both the need to show the outside how public funds are used and the need to revitalise the internal culture. The government, on the other hand, has realised that trust is necessary for a "control system" to reach beyond the simplest kinds of information on what goes on at such diverse institutions as universities and university colleges, and for the institutions to strive for excellence rather than meeting specified standards.

The improvement-oriented approach is necessary to reach the challenging desired changes in Swedish higher education institutions, which are primarily public agencies, operating under government control; a shift from a slightly inward-looking, rule-obeying culture of bureaucracy to a self-regulating, outward-looking culture of professionalism, where teachers take responsibility for what students learn. "Placing the students at the center", has been a

frequent buzzword of recent changes. What is ultimately at stake is the safeguarding of higher education's contribution to society at large.

In September this year, we organised a conference to guide us in the further development of our quality assurance mechanisms. "How can quality assurance support processes of innovation?", was the general question. It turned into a stimulating discussion on the conditions for higher education in general, with participants from parliament, business, academia and others. It also turned out to be a support for our chosen course of action, much more so than courtesy suggests.

The first paper was presented by Vin Massaro, who is Registrar at Flinders University, Australia, and editor of the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. He reports on the findings of a study he is conducting for the OECD and thereby gives an overview of the various models chosen by different countries, what they focus on and how they organise their quality assurance.

The second paper is by Ton Vroeijenstijn of the Dutch universities' association (VSNU), a long-time leader of the European quality assurance-movement. He compares Sweden to the Netherlands, which he regards as not strong enough on the support for improvement.

The third paper is by Lee Harvey, Director of the Quality Research Centre at the University of Central England. It is a passionate support for a focus on the transformation of students and making clear what training higher education should give its students. Such a focus on higher education's basic aims provides a certain perspective on quality assurance.

The last paper is by Frans van Vught, Director of the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, Netherlands and recently elected Rector of that university. His paper gives an overview of a number of relevant sets of literature covering topics such as options in quality control, characteristics of higher education institutions and the conditions for innovation. The central question of his analysis is how governments can stimulate innovation in higher education.

It remains to be seen how far higher education institutions can transform themselves and to what extent external quality assurance mechanisms can

help. What we can conclude so far, is that Sweden seems to be on the right track for the necessary renewal of higher education.

Stockholm, December 1996

Stig Hagström
University Chancellor

Agneta Bladh
Director General

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I Learning from audit?

– Preliminary impressions from a survey of OECD countries

Dr Vin Massaro

Quality 1: A recent rallying cry used by many, defined by few, and seldom the basis of thoughtful discussion; 2: (rarely) Superiority as defined by what the customer is willing to pay for.

(Shapiro, Eileen C. (1995) Fad surfing in the boardroom)

1.1 Introduction

This paper will review a number of quality systems with a view to proposing a best practice system. As the question of what we do next in quality assessment in Australia is very much current, the paper will also serve to inform that debate.

While not quite as pessimistic as Eileen Shapiro, I can see her point. Almost every system of quality assurance has begun with high ideals about measuring and demonstrating the quality of the academic enterprise and ended with self-congratulations about the excellent ways in which universities are now able to gather and analyse statistical information about themselves - from the sublime to the mundane. Universities must now know more about themselves statistically than ever before, but do they actually know any more about how good they are as academic institutions? Knowing that we produce 10% more graduates at half the cost we did ten years ago may please governments, but what does it tell us about the quality of our product?

Underlining my fear of what governments might ultimately treat as demonstrations of quality is an early report about Italian quality assessment in which the government proposes to use the results for the “re-adjustment of funds” based partly on the unit costs of students and partly on the quality of the institution as measured by a set of “objective parameters”. The objectives of these re-adjustments includes “the reduction of production cost differentials within homogeneous areas” (Gola 1996). The Finnish approach is not very different (Välilmaa 1996; Hämäläinen et al. 1996; Finnish Ministry of Education 1996).

Quality assessment, evaluation and audit have become almost synonymous to describe a world pandemic which, in its pure form, ultimately seeks to establish whether institutions of higher learning are delivering what they should and whether they are doing it well. While the concept of quality assurance seems almost everywhere to have been introduced by the need for governments to make universities more accountable for the public funds they consume, the tendency in many places has been to turn to industry concepts of quality management for answers to how one measures quality in universities. There has also been much debate on the development of performance indicators and on the collection of information, but there have not been significant examples of defining what universities should be doing so that methods can be devised for measuring how well they do it.

It is possible that the international system has now developed the most elaborate forms for measuring the measurable in universities, but few, if any, have established what constitutes an appropriate level of expenditure and staff student ratio, for example, to ensure that they can produce the best teaching and learning environment and the best research. Yet if one asks universities to define what they do or to justify their existence, they will not answer that they are producing a certain number of graduates at a pre-determined cost per unit of production. They will speak instead of more noble missions such as to generate, preserve and transmit knowledge - or "*créer, comprendre, former, informer, éduquer*", as a speaker at the recent OECD/IMHE conference put it (Bornarel 1996).

While we still argue that unit costs are only measures of a production company's output, we always succumb to such measurements when governments insist upon it. The result is that the "evaluative state", as Neave and van Vught (1991) have called it or the "intrusive state" according to Barnett (1996), has been able to prove its thesis that the funds available - whatever these may be - are sufficient to produce quality results simply because it can demonstrate that the reduction of resources has not led to a reduction in the number of graduates.

Assuming that we would all wish to argue that the only reason we are interested in quality assessment in universities is to ensure that it exists and that there are reliable means of ensuring its maintenance and continuous improvement, we should seek to find examples of where it approximates these aims to see whether we can learn from those systems to produce better ones in our own institutions.

1.2 The OECD study

The OECD Project, entitled “Quality Management, Quality Assessment and the Decision-Making Process”, investigates the impact of external quality assessment upon institutional management and decision-making. Institutions were asked to participate in the project by preparing a case study describing the national context for their quality assessment system, how it was conducted and by whom, and how it had affected the institution. Some 48 institutions and agencies from 23 countries agreed to participate (appendix A) and twenty case studies had been received at the time of writing. I have also examined the quality assessment systems of countries not represented in the project for comparative purposes.

The project has some limitations caused by self-selection. In some countries only one institution or a quality assessment agency is represented and in others the mix might have been better had the project team been free to choose. Other limitations are caused by the evolving nature of quality systems in each country.

While each participating institution was asked to prepare its case study in accordance with a standard framework, authors were encouraged to draw out unique features about their institutions or systems and about their institutional experiences. The case study authors were asked to focus on the following:

- the context for quality assessment, including national system descriptions;
- the internal quality assurance methods which are in place in the institution;
- how quality assurance affects the management and decision-making processes - planning, resource allocation, curriculum development, etc.;
- the impact of external quality requirements on the institution at the structural, cultural, curriculum and governance levels;
- where possible, institutions were asked to undertake internal case studies of recently evaluated departments or disciplines;
- the interpretation of outcomes from the quality assessments and how the future of the institution’s mission, policies, structure and culture are related to this.

Each of the national systems will be described in a standard format (appendix B).

1.3 Context of external quality review

The contextual statements of national systems and the brief examination of other national systems are remarkable for the degree of similarity in the reasons for conducting quality assessments. There emerges a progression in most of the countries examined from the massification of higher education, associated increases in government expenditure, the need to reduce these levels of expenditure, and the need for the public to be reassured that quality continues to exist despite these reductions. There were some variations on this theme in some parts of Europe where governments were giving new levels of autonomy to institutions and wanted to be assured that quality would not decline in the absence of government control, even though the autonomy in question tended to fall short of that concept as it is understood in Anglo-Saxon universities.

A further variation on the theme is in those countries where quality assessment serves an accreditation purpose. These include the emerging or changing Eastern European systems and those in South East Asia. Here the concern is more to establish the gold standard for being an institution of higher learning. It could be said that in the Western European and Anglo-Saxon models the quality movement is like a middle class obsession, whereas in the emerging nations it is a matter of life and death. Nevertheless, the questions raised are essentially the same and the measurement tools are not dissimilar, so it is possible to argue that good quality assessment systems should be transferable between countries. It should be possible to determine best practice in each system to create a more advanced model of quality assessment.

There is also a constant theme of governments responding to public demand for reassurance that mass higher education has not resulted in inferior higher education, nor that it is using funds which could be better spent elsewhere - the efficiency and cost-benefit analysis approach. In this area governments are in somewhat of a cleft stick. The global massification of higher education was driven by public demand for more university places. Having reacted to that public demand governments are now being accused of doing it on the

cheap and at the expense of quality. The places were produced at marginal funding levels and when universities complained they were first told that they should be more efficient and then that the proposition of declining quality should be tested. Here the universities in general played a bad hand. They were so concerned with demonstrating their excellence that they enabled every quality assessment body to report that quality had not been affected by the funding reductions.

In many of the countries represented in the project there was a tradition of regular peer review, including the involvement of international peers. While being self-directed, essentially voluntary and uncoordinated, they can act as powerful quality assurance measures at the local level. Recent developments have not so much replaced these systems as attempt to build upon them, to formalise them and to generalise them across institutions. The concern that the earlier systems were too informal and could not be aggregated to give institutional results has been addressed by requiring some form of meta evaluation to examine the institution and the system as a whole.

In all the countries represented in the project there has been an acceptance that universities should have programmes of quality improvement and quality assurance, even though the debate about method has been ongoing and not always amicable. The fear of governments interfering in the internal affairs of institutions remains widespread.

1.4 Who does external quality reviews?

Quality reviews are usually undertaken by agencies of government or semi-autonomous bodies supported by government. These agencies either establish the review committees or undertake the reviews themselves. In Sweden the agency supervises the process of local reviews, conducts its own discipline and institutional reviews and accredits new degree courses. In Holland the quality review system is “owned” by the universities through the Association of Universities of the Netherlands, but a government agency, the Inspectorate of Higher Education, monitors the reports and ensures that follow-up action is taken on the results. In France there is a National Committee for Evaluation which uses peer review and reports to the President, but the degree to which it is able to influence university compliance is debatable.

The major differences can be seen in the United States and Canada. The federal system of government in both countries reduces the ability of the central government to impose conditions on university management, although there is present in both the ability to effect change as a condition of receiving certain national funds - research funding or, in the United States, eligibility for student support.

In the United States, evaluation is conducted at the programme accreditation level by relevant professional associations and at the institutional level by six regionally based commissions. Evaluation and accreditation has always been based on a voluntary, self-regulatory, non-government system. Nevertheless most institutions participate and most implement the recommendations of accreditation committees. In 1992 the national legislature attempted to force all states to establish post-secondary review entities (SPRE) as a condition of eligibility for student aid. It had also proposed that poor performance on a set of indicators could trigger a review of all state institutions. The SPREs did not eventuate because of opposition from institutions. Instead the institutions have established a new national body, the Higher Education Accreditation Board, to supervise state accreditation procedures. Its independence will be guaranteed by charter (Franzosa, S.D. in Cowen 1996; El-Khawas 1995).

Canada has a long history of peer review at the discipline, department and institutional levels, with the aim increasingly for institutions to assess themselves against international norms. There is also a long-standing process of evaluation for the appointment, retention and promotion of staff, with published criteria and procedural transparency. Staff are evaluated on the basis of student and collegial assessments as well as service to their professions. Programmes are reviewed every five to seven years, with a self-evaluation followed by an external review. Review reports are considered by the senior academic board of the institution. It is an internally driven process, and system level reviews are both rare and controversial (John Mallea in Cowen (1996), pp. 51-59). More recently the Province of Quebec has established a formal structure for the evaluation of its colleges, a two-year compulsory sector of education for all students wishing to proceed from secondary to technical or university education. The system is administered by a commission with power to accredit courses and to ensure that they conform with ministry policy.

1.5 The purpose of external quality review

Most of the countries which have responded to the OECD survey so far have adopted the approach of measuring the efforts being made to ensure and enhance quality rather than quality itself. While the accreditation systems do require some measure of quality per se, it tends to be couched in terms of national or international benchmarking. At the same time, if institutions measure their excellence, repute and standing through the opinions of peers, any system which uses the results in a constructive and rigorous way can be assumed to achieve quality. In most countries the main purpose of external quality review is to ensure that quality has been maintained after new authority is transferred from governments to institutions.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarise the qualities of each system available at the time of writing. However the purposes can be further elaborated within the following broad categorisations:

1.5.1 Accreditation

This takes three forms: that practised in the United States where there is regular accreditation based on predetermined definitions of standards. The system and the national culture is so geared to competition that accreditation is of great significance even if it is not compulsory. The other form of accreditation is that required by governments before they will register new institutions, and is mainly to be found in the Eastern European systems and some of the South-East Asian ones, especially where accreditation of new private institutions is involved. Thirdly there is the professional accreditation of certain courses.

1.5.2 Internationalisation

This takes two forms: Universities have always been interested in international comparisons and many have a tradition of measuring themselves against their perceived peers or betters. This is still present in the quality assessment process, but it emerges also as a result of the rapid increase in student mobility and the need for the academic community to know how to assess student achievement from a variety of countries. In emerging systems, internationalisation takes the form of a standard against which institutions can measure themselves to demonstrate their status. In Hong Kong international peer review and examination has been used to legitimise academic standards (Kai-ming Cheng in Cowen (1996), pp. 82-101, p.87).

1.5.3 Accountability

This is usually described in the form of governments seeking reassurance for the effective and efficient use of resources while at the same time maintaining or improving educational quality. It tends to rely more heavily on performance indicators and is generally the system least favoured by academics. It tends to be regarded by them as measuring the wrong things and as evidence of government interference in academic judgements.

1.5.4 Reassurance

This is covered by a number of the categories described above, but it is that form of quality assurance which, after major expansion accompanied by funding reductions, is necessary to demonstrate that quality has not suffered. It is sometimes used by institutions to show that their standards have not suffered and make it part of their public relations. It is also a system resulting from the existence of external quality assurance, where institutions have decided that continuous measures of quality are necessary for their own self-confidence.

1.5.5. Search for excellence

This is not often mentioned in these secular times, but there are institutions which have voluntarily undertaken quality assessments to define and identify best practice and then to seek to emulate it. The United States and Canadian quality processes are among the ones which refer to this as an explicit aim.

1.5.6 Evaluation for continuous improvement

This is probably the most acceptable form of quality assessment among the universities themselves. It is the system most often cited as emerging from the academic community. It has been referred to as evaluation to improve rather than to prove.

That universities should concern themselves with evaluation and quality assurance is self-evident. It lies at the heart of what universities are about, and it is usually referred to as a search for excellence. If they cannot be sure that what they are doing is still at the forefront of the field of knowledge, that their students are being trained to think as well as to learn, then there is a problem of self-doubt let alone the question of accountability. The difficult question is how we know that we have attained excellence and how we know that we are continuing to improve upon it. It is often said that these questions

are relatively simple to answer in the area of research because the work is either published or it is not; it is either used as the basis for further research or it is forgotten and ignored. In the areas of teaching and learning the problem is less simple and community service is almost impossible to measure.

1.6 Methods

The most common method of assessment in the countries studied was some form of peer review, involving national or national and international assessors. It was generally felt that international assessors were an essential feature of the process. The involvement of government officials is not uncommon, nor that of students, and industry is sometimes represented on system level assessing teams.

The evaluation is generally at the discipline or programme level with some degree of institutional and system level assessment being part of some systems (the Inspectorate of Education in Holland, and the Ministry of Education in Finland). In the United Kingdom the process is split between two assessing bodies, one concentrating on disciplines and another on institutions.

In most cases, the system involves a self-evaluation phase, generally based on standard formats for documentation. There is little evidence, except in Australia and the United Kingdom, of a central agency imposing limits on the amount of material produced as part of the self-evaluation.

Visits by assessment teams were common to all systems, with the period varying from one day in Australia to an indefinite period in France. The most common was for visits to be of about three days, with follow-up visits as required. The Norwegian system allows a total of eighteen months for the process of self-evaluation, visits and reporting (six months for each phase).

With the exception of Canada, reporting is public, although few countries (Holland, the United States) have a systematic review of the implementation of recommendations. Links to funding were rare (Australia, Finland and the UK), but links to accreditation or similar threshold assessments are not uncommon.

1.7 Statistical information

Cowen (1996, p.3) ends his Introduction with the question: "Is it possible to have a system which is both chaotic and creative while being measurable?" He argues that perhaps the apparently chaotic nature of universities is an integral part of the creative process, which might be stultified if constantly measured. An Australian review of efficiency and effectiveness in higher education remarked in its introduction "The operations of higher education institutions are not always amenable to detailed statistical and financial analyses, even assuming that necessary data are always available" (CTEC 1986, p.3).

The emphasis on data gathering is unlikely to improve the actual product of the institution even if it does provide us with information. Many central government authorities see statistical data as the most objective measurement of the performance of an activity. It is easy to see why, because it requires little knowledge of the activity in question but generates simple reports for political masters. In higher education there has been an attempt to generate performance indicators to satisfy this need. Those produced in the United Kingdom in 1988 required so many footnotes and caveats that virtually none of the tables could be read with any confidence. But what was most notable was that the information told you nothing about the academic outcomes of the institution concerned. In a move more likely to approach what should be measured, the University of Guelph in Canada is attempting to produce output measures by seeking student and graduate responses to how they rated their competencies in the various categories represented in the university's stated learning objectives.

While there seems to be general agreement that statistical information is necessary to the task of assessment, there is widespread concern at the use of formal performance indicators. They are seen as dangerous because they give an apparently simple measure of performance which does not reflect what universities do. There is less concern at the use of performance indicators for the measurement of research performance because there appears to be a closer link between what is being measured and the conclusions which can be drawn.

A Norwegian study (Stensaker 1996) of the effects of its quality assessment process reports that staff had had enough of results-oriented and strategic planning because these strategies had nothing to do with education.

Hungarian respondents feel that the statistical information is both burdensome and inappropriate for making academic judgements. Statistical information is agreed to be useful to provide a contextual framework for quality assessment, but it should be used as an aid to judgement rather than a substitute for it.

1.8 Outcomes

Irrespective of the system, it seems that external quality assessment has had a demonstrable impact on the internal management of institutions. While there is criticism both of the need for and the ultimate aims of external quality assurance, the process itself has generated a high level of internal discussion of curriculum and, where it has been based on good peer review, the recommendations of assessing committees have tended to be accepted and implemented. In some cases the very possibility of a government-initiated process has led to the establishment of quite elaborate and effective internal quality evaluations.

Concern has been expressed in the Danish study that the level of central control is too strong, with no new programme approved for longer than five years and all assessment forms and study programmes being determined by a central authority. On the other hand, the five phase quality assurance system - planning, self-assessment, surveys, visits and public reporting - is regarded as effective. The Belgian (Flemish) quality assessment system seems to be the least intrusive. Although the central authority has all the control qualities of the Danish system, the case study points out that the assessments have led to problems being tackled and solved because they have been made explicit.

The National Autonomous University of Mexico (Rojo et al., 1996) was one of the universities which established an internal system because the resolution of the problems it had identified could not await the advent of a national system. It offered staff financial inducements for achieving certain objectives, and it claims that this has led to significantly improved performance and productivity - more staff are receiving external research funding and public recognition; graduation rates have improved; there is evidence of curriculum improvements; and the administration of the institution has been made more effective through the decentralisation of decision-making,

The University of Amsterdam case study reports that review recommendations have been taken seriously. The assessments have contributed to useful discussion within the university, and training for new lecturing staff has been introduced. The self-evaluation phase was seen to be crucial because the critical analysis which it provoked led to improvements even before these were identified by the assessing group. What is resented is the monitoring role played by the Inspectorate of Education.

The Hungarian case studies criticise the quantity of statistical data required for the preparatory documentation and the need to produce detailed information on curricula and its aims and purposes. However, given that this constitutes an accreditation phase, this level of data collection is probably understandable and is not dissimilar to the type of information required of former colleges of advanced education in the United Kingdom and Australia when they sought to introduce a new course. At the same time, the system is considered to have benefited from the assessment exercise because it has identified courses which should be encouraged and retained and those which are not strong enough for continued viability. It is seen to have improved the quality of teaching through regular student evaluation of teaching and more detailed course definition and description. It has also led to changes in administrative structures which have improved the efficiency of operations, and to the establishment of regular quality control mechanisms.

The Norwegian system already had quinquennial peer reviews of disciplines by external assessors, with a focus on self-evaluation and development. The new system continued that tradition placing emphasis on the improvement of educational quality and the learning environment. The results are not used at the central political level, nor are they tied to funding. The problems identified relate to the ineffectiveness of national data collections and the juxtaposition of internal and external assessment using different methodologies. On the other hand the assessment exercise is seen to have assisted staff in critical evaluation and judgement. The consciousness-raising aspects of the exercise are seen as important, and the results are used for curriculum design and improvement. An issue raised about the disciplinary reviews is that their narrow focus fails identify issues requiring institutional responses.

Australia is the only country to have chosen a whole institution model without the underpinning of routine discipline or peer evaluations. It used

a brief visit (one day per institution) by a review team to assess each institution in a comparative context. It reported its results in comparative terms and league tables emerged as the public face of the exercise. Because the committee began from the premise that good processes would lead to quality outcomes, it sought evidence of good processes. The case studies report that despite opposition to this approach and to the rankings, institutions were forced into developing quality assurance processes, which in turn led to far more discussion and critical self-analysis than would otherwise have occurred (Baldwin 1995). Because of the tradition of accreditation in the former colleges, it had been anticipated that the universities which had emerged from them were more likely to do well under this system, especially in the area of teaching and learning, but this was not in fact the case. Nevertheless, the case study from a former college (Mikol 1996) argues that the effects of external evaluation were less because the former college had continued its elaborate accreditation processes when it became a university. At the same time the government intervention intensified activities which were perhaps becoming less practised.

Whether these improvements occurred to the same extent in all institutions is another matter, although strong institutional leadership seems to have played a significant role in institutions succeeding in the quality process. The financial rewards offered ensured that all institutions participated in the process despite the fact that it was voluntary. However the degree to which the benefits can be institutionalised into a culture of quality improvement is in doubt because the inculcation of continuous quality improvement requires continuity and stability in the evaluation process. The Australian system lasted only three years amid a lack of clarity as to its purposes (Massaro 1995 a, b), and discussions are now taking place about what should happen next. A new government has proposed that a national agency should be established, but no funding has been allocated for it to perform its functions, nor have those functions been defined (Vanstone 1996). The financial rewards which were part of the previous system will no longer apply, and it is likely that the new system will concentrate more on accountability and be more intrusive than the last. But unless the government allocates sufficient funding for the actual processes of quality assurance to be carried out, it is unlikely that the result will be convincing.

The Swedish system has only just come into operation, even though the formal decision to establish quality audit was taken in 1992. The University

of Uppsala (Engwall 1995 and 1996), acting on what seemed inevitable, developed a very effective mechanism for internal quality assurance. Its efforts have been highly praised by the first institutional audit report of the university which has just been completed (Högskoleverket 1996b). The university's internal system was able to identify a number of areas for improvement, and its reports appear to have been well-received. What is impressive about the system is both that it has worked and that it has done so with a high degree of acceptance among academic staff. It is a clear demonstration of what can be achieved through a sensible internal approach. (The case of the University of Helsinki is not dissimilar (Hämäläinen et al. 1996)).

At the systemic level, Sweden's quality audit system embodies some of the best features of the better systems. The new government concluded in 1995, that "quality enhancement is not ... expressed in special programmes but ... [is] an attitude which must characterise the day-to-day work of each institution" (Nilsson & Näslund 1996). It therefore promoted a dynamic concept of quality assessment and enhancement as having the best chance of achieving improvements, with an emphasis on supporting institutions in their task of developing a culture of continuous improvement. The system involves a local programme of departmental reviews, self-evaluation and national and international peer reviews. It has up to three parallel national level systems: a national programme of discipline reviews; institutional reviews to examine local quality assurance and promotion systems; and quality controls through the accreditation of institutions wishing to introduce new courses.

The various reasons which have led Sweden to delay the introduction of its system have had the positive effect of allowing it to learn from the mistakes the rest of us have made and developed what seems to me to be a more advanced system. The period of reflection which has been unwittingly imposed upon it has given it the time to work through the problems and the documents describing the system and its expectations are clearer and more precise than any I have seen. In my view, Sweden has developed an enlightened and thorough approach, and I should imagine that it will have little difficulty in getting academics to accept the process. The existing solid base of discipline review and peer evaluation no doubt helped as well.

The Swedish system would appear to have every prospect of success, although the continuing role of a central agency in the accreditation of apparently autonomous institutions must be questioned. It demonstrates an incapacity to accept that the agency has the potential to provide adequate levels of accountability without what seems to me to be the heavy hand of central accreditation. As I understand it, the National Agency will continue to control the introduction of new degrees, including the content and level of degree programmes, and it will continue to control the establishment of chairs at the non PhD-granting institutions. My colleagues in Anglo-Saxon countries would argue that this is not a reflection of the devolution of autonomy, nor a measure of trust in the Academies. My own surprise is greater because, having had some exposure to Swedish academics in the context of quality discussions, I would have argued that it is in a better position than most to trust them to be rigorous judges of quality. Swedish academics, in my experience, are among the few who are not embarrassed to talk about achieving excellence and setting standards. I hope that the Agency will rethink its position once it has seen the quality assurance system in operation.

The question of the role of central agencies is a common one in the case studies. One of the fears is that a heavy involvement of such agencies in the definition and assessment of quality might lead to a culture of compliance rather than quality improvement. So while it may be necessary for such agencies to be established to set the process in motion, they should ultimately be dismantled to allow self-regulation by the system - as proposed in the United States. At the very least, it is argued, the agencies should be more light-handed, with a broad monitoring role rather than control over accreditation or quasi-accreditation processes. Their role might thus be limited to devising standardised measures of quality at the system level, followed by a broad monitoring function. If the quality assessment and self-regulation systems are seen to be effective, it should not be necessary for such bodies to do otherwise.

1.9 Discussion

Governments tend to think in the short term and to react to public opinion and budgetary imperatives which need to be resolved within their elected terms. It is therefore not surprising that they tend to want measures of accountability like those applied to financial matters - they are audit-oriented. As we have seen, the opinion of those within the system is that

evaluation works best as part of a collegial, expert system which is both dynamic, oriented towards continuous quality improvement and subject to the usual rules of academic engagement where criticism can be robust but constructive and leading to mutual learning. Governments would see this image as somewhat idealised and an excuse for keeping things within the impenetrable academic club and doing nothing. This is a legitimate fear and any self-regulating system should be sufficiently transparent to overcome it.

There is no question that some form of quality assessment will continue to exist or be introduced in every country with a university system. Given what I believe to be the valid position of many in higher education that governments should not be too closely involved in the academic enterprise, and given the equally valid concern on the part of government that it should know whether its universities are delivering a quality product, the question is whether there is a system which will satisfy both needs. Quality assessment will almost certainly be conducted by a government appointed agency, even if it is given statutory independence from government. Universities need to ensure that the systems of quality assurance and improvement which they establish internally are so rigorous, independent and effective that government agencies will be prepared to accept the internal system as an adequate surrogate for external ones. Governments will need to be persuaded that institutions need to be funded to create and maintain such systems because they are most likely to deliver the results which the government itself wants.

The systems represented in the OECD project are variations on a theme which includes self-evaluation, followed by committee visits to conduct peer reviews, followed by a public report. The one recently introduced in Quebec inserts an expert consultative committee before the self-evaluation, to define the appropriate evaluation method for the programme in question (CEEC 1996, pp. 12-13).

As we have seen any committee of audit from outside the higher education system is considered by the system as inappropriate for the task. Quality Assessment Agencies are also regarded with suspicion. My impression is that the best results are obtained through systems which involve peer review, preferably at the discipline or programme level, followed by an overall assessment of the institution based on the co-ordinated results of peer reviews. In Finland, Norway and Hungary academics seemed prepared to accept even trenchant criticisms and to act on the concerns raised if these

come from their academic peers. However, the programme and meta-evaluation systems need different approaches, maintaining the international perspective as the common theme.

The Swedish University Chancellor, Professor Stig Hagström, ends his introductory remarks in that country's publication on Quality Audit in Sweden (Högskoleverket 1996a, p.10) with "Evaluation is not a question of judging correctly or incorrectly...but...an evaluation and examination of the method applied and its reliability." The process of evaluation should therefore not be one in which external examiners set a test and give you one opportunity within a limited time to complete it correctly. Whether performed at the discipline, programme or institutional level, the process should be seen as a control mechanism in which peers are asked to demonstrate the validity of their quality assurance procedures and in which the assessors and assessed can enter into critical, but constructive debate. The result should be advice for improvement, and the follow-up visits should act as a control to ensure that previously agreed recommendations have been acted upon. The government should have simple mechanisms for ensuring that the work of assessment has been done and the recommendations of the assessors have been implemented.

In a 1986 report on "Efficiency and Effectiveness in Australian Higher Education", the Australian Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission concluded (CTEC 1986, p. 263) that "procedures for self-evaluation which are established voluntarily, and assume a professional approach to their task on the part of academics, will be more effective in maintaining and improving the standards of academic activity than those which are the result of external pressure". While this is from the enlightened days when we trusted our Academies to do the right thing, it continues to be true - the Uppsala case study stands out as a good example of it. We should therefore be aiming for a system which adopts this as a guiding principle, with the light hand of government supervision guiding it to achieve the desired results.

The recently completed European pilot project on the evaluation of quality in higher education also concluded that evaluation should commence with an institutional self-assessment in the context of the institution's mission statement and the goals and objectives of the disciplines. It suggests that evaluation should be conducted through a process of peer review in which the reviewers have the relevant skills and expertise and are judged by their

peers to be both legitimate assessors and independent. It suggested that such peer review groups should ideally contain international peers (European Commission 1996).

If one can draw some general lessons from the case studies and other reports on quality assurance systems they are:

- Assessments are more acceptable and more likely to lead to improvements when they are conducted by peers, including international peers.
- Quality assessment is best done at the discipline or programme level to ensure that the reviews can be conducted by relevant experts whose judgements are likely to be accepted by staff and whose advice is likely to lead to improvements (with the exception of Australia, every country surveyed by the OECD project and the European pilot project used discipline reviews as the basis for quality assessment).
- Countries with a tradition of peer reviews through discipline evaluation by both national and international experts will generally experience less trauma when external quality assurance is introduced (Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Sweden).
- Systems should focus on continuous improvement, with an enabling rather than an auditing function. Where the process is seen to be one of assisting in the development of quality it is more likely to have long-term results than inspectorial ones.
- A mix of approaches is most likely to produce effective measurements of an institution's quality.
- The measurement of quality at the system level is more feasible with binary systems or clear mission differentiation between institutions, because judgements can be made against agreed missions and comparisons between like institutions (United States, Canada).
- The system must be funded adequately, involving a long term commitment.

Based on the above lessons, what qualities should a good quality assessment system have? I believe that a good system would be one which combines the

best features of those found in Sweden, France, the United States, Holland, and Quebec and Canada. It should contain a discipline (programme) element and an institutional element (I would favour the United States approach over that of the United Kingdom) and should:

- be aimed at continuous improvement rather than regulation and should be cyclical over a five year period;
- be based on a system of self-evaluation, followed by peer review, public reporting and periodic follow-up by the review team to ensure that action has been taken on recommendations;
- rely on national and international peer review;
- have the capacity for its results to be aggregated at the institutional level, but that the institutional assessment should be separate from the discipline one;
- be based on an institution's mission with the institution being required as part of its public funding to demonstrate that it has appropriate quality assurance measures and acts on the reports of external evaluators.

My preference would be for rigorous self-regulation, and I would argue for a system which is owned and controlled by the institutions, with public reporting and transparency, and public standards or definitions of quality.

If quality assurance or audit is to be administered by a national agency of government, the agency should be light-handed in its approach, relying on institutions to develop good systems. It should be sufficiently involved to act as guarantor of the system to the government and the public to ensure that the quality system works within its stated aims and objectives. The agency should establish the processes and supervise their introduction, but then gradually remove itself to a watching and fiduciary brief. The agency should report publicly on an annual basis on the health of the system.

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Appendix A

OECD PROJECT ON INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Participating institutions and agencies

(The Case Studies already received are noted with an asterisk *)

Australia

- Monash University *
- University of Newcastle
- University of Western Sydney - Nepean *
- New South Wales TAFE - Chatswood

Austria

- University of Innsbruck

Belgium

- Katholieke Universiteit Leuven *
- Université Catholique de Louvain
- Université Libre de Bruxelles

Canada

- CEGEP Saint Jérôme and the Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial du Québec *

Denmark

- Aalborg University *
- Evalueringcenteret

Finland

- University of Helsinki *
- University of Jyväskylä *
- University of Oulu *
- Vantaa Polytechnic *

France

- Comité National d'Évaluation
- Université Louis Pasteur, Strasbourg
- Université des Sciences Sociales, Toulouse I

Germany

- Evaluation Agency of Lower Saxony

Greece

- Technological and Educational Institute of Patras *
- Economic and Commercial Sciences University of Athens

Hungary

- Université L. Kossuth (Debrecen)
- École Normale de Nyiregyhaza *
- École Normale de Ferenc Kölscey (Debrecen) *

Italy

- Politecnico di Torino
- Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia

Mexico

- Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México *
- Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana de México

Netherlands

- École Supérieure d'Amsterdam
- State University of Limburg
- Technical University of Delft
- University of Amsterdam *
- Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) *

Norway

- Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education *

Portugal

- Portuguese Universities Foundation/Council of Rectors

Slovenia

- Institute of Social Sciences

Spain

- Universidad Complutense de Madrid
- Universidad Politecnica de Catalunya

Sweden

- University of Uppsala *

Switzerland

- Université de Lausanne

United Kingdom**England**

- Anglia Polytechnic University (Chelmsford)
- The Open University
- Sheffield Hallam University (Leicester)
- University of Central England (Birmingham)
- University of Bath

Scotland

- The University of Edinburgh

Wales

- University of Cardiff *

United States

- University of North Carolina

Appendix B

OECD PROJECT: NATIONAL SYSTEMS

1. Context of External Quality Review (EQR)

- To what forms of external regulation are institutions subjected?
- How, when, why was EQR set up?
- What did it replace?
- Other HE influences/changes? (ie diversity, growth, etc.)

2. Who does EQR (meta agency)

- Sponsor (is there legislation?)
- ownership
- relative size
- scope (all institutions/subjects, optional, compulsory)

3. Purpose of EQR

- (accountability)
- (improvement)
- stimulate competitiveness
- transfer authority from state to institutions (and opposite)
- quality 'check' on new institutions
- assign institution status (eg rubber-stamping exercise or accreditation)
- international comparison
- encourage improvement

4. Methods

Beyond self evaluation and visit

- status, experience, motives of assessors
- documentation - self-assurance (how prescriptive?, how much?)
- visits (nature, length, who seen, etc)
- Who?, what do they do?
- standardisation
- other things (eg PIs, Denmark - employers)

5. Outcomes

- Reports
- Funding

- Reputation
- Ranking

6. Evaluation

Is there a review of the system

- enquiry into

Table 1*

| The Evaluation of Higher Education | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| | Australia | Belgium (Flemish) | Canada | Canada (Quebec) | Denmark |
| Agency | Committee on Quality in Higher Education | VLIR | None-evaluation is voluntary, institution-based and self-monitoring | Commission d'Évaluation de l'Enseignement Collégial (CEEC) | Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education |
| Funding | Federal Government | Institutions | Institutions | Ministry | Ministry |
| Scope of evaluation | Institution - Teaching - Research - Community Service | Discipline - Teaching and Learning | - Institution - Discipline - Staff | - Programmes - Teaching and Learning | - Discipline - Teaching and Learning |
| Goals | - Maintain and enhance the quality of higher education by recognising and rewarding effective quality assurance policies and practices and excellent outcomes - Promote diversity | - Quality improvement of teaching and learning - Accountability | - Continuous quality improvement - Teaching and Learning - Accountability - International reference | - Continuous quality improvement - Maintain highest quality standards - Create culture of evaluation - Public Accountability - Attest to quality (accreditation ?) | Quality improvement of teaching and learning |
| Type of Institution | University sector | University sector | - University and college | College sector | - University sector - Non-university sector |
| Method | - Self-assessment - Visit by Committee - Public Report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Internal report to Board | - Commission review - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report |

* Based on material gathered for the OECD project and material published in the European Commission's Pilot Project.

Table 2*

| The Evaluation of Higher Education | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| | Finland | France | Hungary | Mexico | Netherlands |
| Agency | Council for the Evaluation of Higher Education | Comité National d'Evaluation (CNE) - National Committee for Evaluation Government | Hungarian Accreditation Commission (1993) Government | National Committee for the Evaluation of Higher Education (1989) Government | VSNU (Universities) - Inspectorate of Education (monitoring) - Institutions - Departments |
| Funding | Ministry of Education | Government | Government | Government | - Institutions - Departments |
| Scope of evaluation | - Institutional - Disciplinary - Thematic - Teaching and learning - Research | - Institutional - Disciplinary - Thematic - Teaching and learning - Research | - Institutional - Disciplinary - International reference | - Institution - Inter-institution - National | - Disciplinary - Programme - Teaching and learning - Research (VSNU) |
| Goals | - Advise Ministry and assist institutions in self-evaluation - Quality improvement - teaching, learning, research and management - Funding implications | Quality evaluation of teaching and learning, research, development and management | - Accreditation - Institution - Courses - Re-accreditation - Quality Improvement - Accountability - after Autonomy | - Co-ordinate national and support local evaluation bodies - Propose quality criteria - Support improvement (professional expertise of staff is assessed locally and rewarded) | - Quality improvement - Accountability - Self-regulation |
| Type of Institution | - University sector - Non-University sector | - University sector - Non-University sector | University | University sector - Non-University sector | - Universities (VSNU) - Non-university sector (Inspectorate of Education) |
| Method | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Report (public?) - Accreditation | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report |

* Based on material gathered for the OECD project and material published in the European Commission's Pilot Project.

Table 3*

| The Evaluation of Higher Education | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| | Norway | Sweden | United Kingdom | United States |
| Agency | Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education | Högskoleverket (National Agency for Higher Education) (Previously Office of the University Chancellor) | - Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) - Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs) | - Six Regional Commissions - Higher Education Accreditation Board (1995) |
| Funding | - Institutions - Ministry | Högskoleverket | - Institutions (HEQC) - Ministry (HEFCs) | Institutions |
| Scope of evaluation | - Disciplinary - Teaching and Learning | - Institutional - Disciplinary - Teaching and learning - National thematic evaluations | - Institutional (HEQC) - Disciplinary (HEFC) - Teaching and learning (HEQC, HEFC) - Research (HEFC) | - Institutional - Programme |
| Goals | Quality improvement through institutional learning | - Quality of teaching and learning - Accountability - Autoregulation - Approval and accreditation of new courses | - Quality improvement of teaching and learning (HEQC) - Continuous quality improvement and minor links to funding (HEFC) | - Accreditation - Accountability - Foster excellence - Continuous Improvement - Counselling - Protect institutions |
| Type of Institution | - University sector - Non-University sector | University sector | - University sector - Non-University sector | University and Colleges |
| Method | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Public report | - Self-evaluation - Peer review - Agency Review and Accreditation - NEAB oversight |

* Based on material gathered for the OECD project and material published in the European Commission's Pilot Project.

2 Accountability and improvement in the republic of scholars

A.I. Vroeijenstijn

2.1 Introduction

The organisers have asked me to talk about the subject ‘Accountability and Improvement in the Republic of Scholars’. I have accepted this invitation, because they also wrote in their letter: “Our point is to get a discussion on whether the various programs for audit, assessment etc. stand a fair chance to succeed in actually supporting the renewal and improvement of universities in general and Swedish in particular”. Furthermore they wrote: “We want a discussion based on facts, but aiming at practical consequences”.

Looking at the development of quality assurance mechanisms in the world of higher education, we may conclude that a lot of progress has been made in the last 10 years. In many countries we encounter a flourishing system, in other countries we see a fruitful discussion about the need for quality assurance. However, at the same time we also see growing problems regarding external quality assessment. The Netherlands have been ahead in experiences with a system in full operation during a long time. The developments nowadays give rise to some observations, which I would like to share with you as input to the discussion.

The title of the conference is “Quality assurance as a support for processes of innovation” In the process of quality assurance, external quality assessment plays an important role. To have a positive influence on quality assurance and, by doing so, on innovation, it will be necessary for External Quality Assessment to meet some conditions:

- EQA should be well balanced on improvement and accountability;
- EQA should be imbedded in internal quality management.

I will dwell on the following topics:

- External quality assessment and accountability
- Quality improvement or quality development

- The republic of scholars and quality assurance
- The importance of internationalization
- Some reflections on the Swedish situation

However, everything said is the personal opinion and view of the author and does not need to represent the opinion of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands or any of its members.

2.2 External quality assessment and accountability

In the discussion about quality assessment, an important topic is the question whether EQA is aiming at improvement or at accountability. In my book *Accountability and Improvement, Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis* I have expressed myself optimistically about the possibility to combine accountability and improvement in one system. But at the same time I wrote: “ Aiming only at improvement, the system will be shipwrecked against the Scylla because the outside stakeholders will ask for accountability and design their own EQA-system. Overemphasizing accountability, the system will disappear in the Charybdis, because improvement will be hindered or even made impossible” ¹

At this moment, I am afraid that the last part of the prediction is coming true in the Netherlands. I am not any longer sure about the possibility to combine the two functions. You may ask why I have changed my mind. To make it clear we have to look at the meaning of accountability and the interpretation of it in the Netherlands.

Before the explosive growth in attention to quality, quality assurance was the responsibility of the Higher Education itself. Through central steering – being common practice in most European countries – governments had enough means to control Higher Education. However, in the eighties, the scene changed. Governments took an attitude of stepping back and promising more autonomy to the institutions. They were no longer interested in detailed regulation beforehand; nowadays they like more to abuse their steering on output. The change in attitude has been connected with two conditions:

- quality should be guaranteed, in one way or another
- the higher education institutions should be accountable for their performance.

Quality improvement and accountability became the buzzwords of the nineties. *Quality improvement* was no matter of discussion and generally accepted as the main aim of assessment activities. Neither *accountability* as such has been disputed. Nobody doubted the righteousness of the request of the government holding higher education institutions accountable for the quality. However in the last years, the word has lost a lot of its credibility by overemphasise and abuse.²

Everybody will agree with the statement: “no autonomy without accountability”. But what does accountability mean? In fact accountability is just as vague as quality. In the literature we find several descriptions:

- “Accountability is to satisfy an external authority (usually the state) that quality is satisfactory and value for money is being obtained”.³
- “A central aspect of ‘accountability’ in any form is that of ‘rendering an account’ of what one is doing in relation to goals that have been set or legitimate expectations that others may have of one’s products, services or processes, in terms that can be understood by those who have a need or right to understand ‘the account’ ”.⁴
- “the pressure for the higher education institutions to demonstrate that they are achieving what the government and/or society requires of them”.⁵

In fact one can distinguish several degrees of accountability as is shown in figure 1:

| One may be hold accountable for: | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|---------------------------|
| *failure *non-quality | *product *outcomes | *process | *content | *providing information |
| If the quality of a product is not good, one is responsible for fixing it. If the pudding is awful, I will go back to the shop | One is asked to show the stakeholder that the outcomes are satisfactory. Is the pudding delicious or not? | One is asked also to show the process for realizing the outcomes. The consumer is not content with the delicious pudding only , but likes to know how it is made. | One is asked to show the content. Not only the recipe but also the ingredients should be given | |

Figure 1: Degrees of accountability

The following examples may make it more clear:

I have decided to buy a new computer. Because I like to surf on World Wide Web, to receive E-mail and faxes, I have asked a good modem to be built in; a video card and a sound blaster are important too. The salesman promised me to deliver the computer well functioning. When I start my computer, my modem is not working. I can not mail nor move on the electronic highway. Of course I go back to the shop and ask them to fix it. The salesman is after all accountable: he has not satisfied the promises and he is responsible for the quality of the product.

This is accountability for failure, for non-quality. The salesman has to fix my computer, but this does not mean that he has to show his clients that all other computers are working as may be expected. Only in the case of non-functioning he will be held accountable.

A second example:

My youngest son is studying at the Technical university of Delft and lives on his own. He has some study loan, but not enough. As parents we have to contribute to his living. Of course he is held accountable for the spent money by showing good study results. However it should undermine his autonomy, if I would ask him to drop in every month with his housekeeping book and show me on what he has spent his money. Do I have a right to say "you should have spent less on drinks and more on books, if his progress in study is satisfactory?"

Looking at higher education, we may say that the first example may be transferred to a situation where there are complaints about the quality of the curriculum. The department is accountable for fixing the shortcomings as soon as possible. The second example is more to connect with external assessment, because higher education institutions are responsible for the money spent and for their results. However, is there a reason to ask for accountability for the educational processes and even the content, if the quality of the expected outcomes are satisfactory?

Of course a government has the right to know if it gets value for money, because it is the main funder of higher education. This degree of accountability is not difficult to build in in an improvement oriented quality assessment system. The external experts, assessing the discipline, may be asked to give a final judgement about the quality of a programme. However, it should be

enough if an expert committee gives the statement: “Minister, do not worry, the quality of this programme in this department is all right. The quality is satisfactory”. Just like a chartered accountant, who is controlling the books of a firm, may confine himself with the statement “the books are all right”, There is one condition: the judgement has to be given in an open, honest and transparent system.

So far so good. But where does the problem start? Problems arise on the one hand because the concept of accountability is getting stretched, on the other hand because there is a lack of trust.

In the Netherlands, accountability has been enlarged with the demand to provide information. Our minister believes that students will choose their field of study, based on quality, if there is enough information available. Therefore the external committees are expected to provide insight into the quality of the curriculum concerned and to make clear the differences between the curricula of the Dutch universities. He wants to have a consumers’ guide for higher education.

Accountability is also abused in another way. More and more, accountability is being used for strengthening control of the universities. The government, embracing an attitude of stepping back and promising more autonomy to the universities, is loosing information. Less information is flowing towards the minister. But, he is still feeling a need for information and a need to keep an eye on the universities. To solve this problem, external quality assessment is expected to provide the wanted information.

Also a lack of trust in the higher education system is a reason to put such a heavy burden upon the external committees. Our Inspectorate is not satisfied with just a committee’s judgement about quality or lack of quality. It wants to have the possibility to draw its own conclusion, based on the information, given by the committees.

The “Dutch model”, which has been followed with so much interest by so many people, is in danger to perish in the Charybdis of accountability. At this moment, the whole system is too much driven by accountability. It is the accountability which sets the rules of the games instead of the needs of higher education.

If the problem regarding accountability will not be solved, it will be very difficult to use external assessment for quality improvement or quality development. Accountability will kill the possibility to use external quality assessment as an instrument for innovation, because:

- The heavy emphasis on the stretched accountability, combined with the demand for information, makes it necessary to have strict prescribed rules for the self evaluation and a strict protocol for the external committees. Therefore the system has little flexibility. This already leads to the complaint, that EQA is becoming more and more a bureaucratic system.
- The stretched accountability will lead to more and more evasive behaviour of the assessed departments because the comprehensive reports are published, containing very detailed information. In the long run staff members will do their best for window-dressing, knowing that all dirty clothes will be shown to the outside world. Such an approach will hinder an open discussion on weaknesses.
- This approach of accountability influences the work of the committees too. The committees tend to tone down their critics. The judgements incline towards 'average' with only a small range of variation: it may be too dangerous to express harsh criticism.

The conclusion can only be that external quality assessment is in danger to change from an instrument for quality development in the hands of the university into a cheap inspectorate, paid by the universities themselves.

For keeping external quality assessment effective, it will be necessary to reshape the accountability function according the following criteria:

- External quality assessment must have some form of accountability;
- Accountability must not be stressed too much and be limited to accountability for non-quality and accountability for the outcomes. This may be done by a judgement like: "the quality is good, the quality is doubtful or there is a lack of quality;"
- The government must trust the opinion of the experts;
- Accountability must not be mixed up with process or content control, nor with providing information.

2.3 Quality improvement and quality development

In many countries higher education is spending a lot of money and time on external quality assessment. Most EQA-systems are claiming improvement being the most important aim of the system. This is true, but do we make the best use of all our efforts? I do not believe so. I think that improvement is hampered because there is too little attention to the phase of follow up. Higher education can profit more from the external assessments if they take care of the follow up in their institution.

It is easier to claim an improvement-orientation than to prove real improvements. As we all know, quality is very difficult to define. It is a multi-interpretable and multi-dimensional concept. Quality only can be seen in a context; quality depends on the situation; quality is in the eyes of the beholder and every beholder has his or her own idea of quality.

A student, thinking about improvement, will stress the importance of a good planning of the curriculum, the quality of the staff, the planning of exams. The scholar will pay attention to the content of the programme, the coherence between the courses, the division of time between teaching and research. The administration will pay attention to the success rates, drop outs, number of graduates.

If parliament or the minister, like in the Netherlands, stress the need for quality improvement again and again, this does not mean that the quality of higher education is bad, comparing the curriculum internationally. It says only: everything is not going as the minister likes it to go.

To prove quality developments is also difficult because there is no rectilinear relation between assessments and improvements. Outcomes and recommendations of an external assessment are merely one of the many factors, decisive for innovation and improvements. Decisions to take action or no action are often made for other reasons. The outcomes of assessments may play a role in it.

Discussing improvements, it is necessary to keep in mind that substantial innovations and quality improvement in education are not simple. The bottle-necks will be found on many places and only tackling the problems from different sides will show perceptible improvements. The following bottle-necks may be mentioned, without being exhaustive:

- The educational process is very complex and knows many helmsmen. The student regulates his/her own learning process, the staff member regulates the teaching process, on faculty/school level the organisational structure is regulated, at central level of the university boundary conditions are set and a minister regulates the higher education system. All those regulators are interrelated and do influence each other.
- Knowledge about effective and efficient measures to enhance the quality of education are limited, in spite of many educational research projects.
- The necessary academic freedom is sometimes used to defend “non-interference”
- There is very little money available for investments in human resources, in didactic training, in hardware and software. We should be aware that quality care is intensive and ask much more from the staff than has been asked for in a time with few students and no pressure from the outside for accountability.
- Processes for curriculum innovations are complex too; especially when the outcomes may have heavy consequences for people.

There are many obstacles on the road towards quality development, as pointed out. It will be not easy to tackle them and to overcome the barriers. However we may name some basic conditions for increasing the chance of improvements:

2.3.1 The self assessment

The self assessment should be as clear as possible. It should be an honest X-ray of the faculty. The whole department (staff and students) should be involved. A good self assessment should provide the department an answer to the following questions:

- Why are we doing what we are doing? Are we doing the right things?
- Are we doing the right things in the right way?
- Do we achieve our goals?

In the republic of scholars, the self-evaluation is an important instrument. It offers the possibility to sit together and discuss the state-of-the-art of the department. The so called republic of scholars may be described sometimes

more clearly as a collection of small kingdoms of chair-holders, defending their own interest. During the self assessment, there is time to look over the frontiers. A curriculum is more than the sum of individual contributions. The self assessment forces the staff to think about the connection between the parts.

2.3.2 The external committee

To make sure, that all efforts put into external quality assessment, will have some effect, it will be necessary for the committees to fulfil some conditions too:

- An external review committee should perform its role as consultant properly, next to its role of accountant.
- It is important that an external committee enjoys the confidence of those being assessed. Without it, the committee has no possibility at all to act as consultant.
- It is important for a committee to formulate its frame of reference very clearly. The assessed should know the criteria for assessment and know against which background the recommendations are made.
- The committees should make clear recommendations and also address the recommendations to the right persons.

2.3.3 The follow up

When the external assessment is over, the job is not yet done. Of course, the department has already put a lot of effort in the self assessment and has been busy during the visit. However, the real work should be done afterwards. The X-ray has been made, the diagnosis has been given, now the cure should be sought. The outcomes should lead to a discussion in the faculty about how to fix the weaknesses and shortcomings. There also should be a dialogue with the faculty board and with the administration at central level. The department should design a plan for action, for quality development and administration and the department should agree upon the way to realise the improvements. Quality should always be on the agenda.

For quality improvement and quality assurance it is necessary to design a structure for continuous attention to quality. Without a well running system of internal quality assurance, all citizens of the republic of scholars will have the tendency to retreat to his or her own kingdom. The question is what does it look like, such an internal quality assurance system?

2.4. The republic of scholars and the quality assurance-system

Many times, we see attempts to introduce quality control mechanisms from industry into higher education: certification, ISO-9000, Total Quality Management, quality circles. Again and again it becomes clear that it is problematic to transfer experiences from one sector of the society to another. The main reasons for failure is the special characteristics of the republic of scholars, compared with industry. One has to take into account its specific character if one likes to introduce quality assurance mechanism in the republic of scholars. Let us try to outline the republic of scholars.

The republic of scholars is very complex, because there are so many activities: teaching, research, community services, so many different inhabitants: students, academic staff, administrators and the republic has different missions: generate new knowledge, educate the next generation of scholars, but also employees for big firms, to be the proverbial louse in the pelt of society.

This all causes many tensions in this republic. Among others between:

- two equal tasks: research and teaching. This tension will grow with declining resources.
- administrators and professionals
- perceptions of quality: administrators (efficiency and effectivity) and professionals (quality of the product)
- central level and the departmental level

The republic of scholars looks to an outsider like a united republic, but just as the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th century, the republic consists of small kingdoms, being the departments or the individual chair-holder.

A quality assurance system in the republic of Scholars should satisfy some conditions. It should meet the needs of the professionals, the students, the administrators, the money-lenders.

Looking at the tensions we see in our republic, it will be clear that it will not always be easy to meet the needs of all participants in the same way.

For the assurance of quality we may use different instruments and different procedures. There is not one model for quality assurance, because there are

more ways leading to Rome. One of the possibilities for looking at internal quality assurance is the ‘model’ given in figure 2.

Every approach of quality assurance starts with the question: “Are we doing the right thing?”. This brings us to the goals and aims of an institute or department. The goals and aims are the frame of reference for the assessment of our quality and for quality assurance. They must be formulated clearly and must meet scientific and societal requirements. Goals and aims should reflect the requirements set by the different stakeholders: students, academic world, employers, government, society-at-large. How does the faculty try to reconcile all those requirements in the formulated aims and objectives?

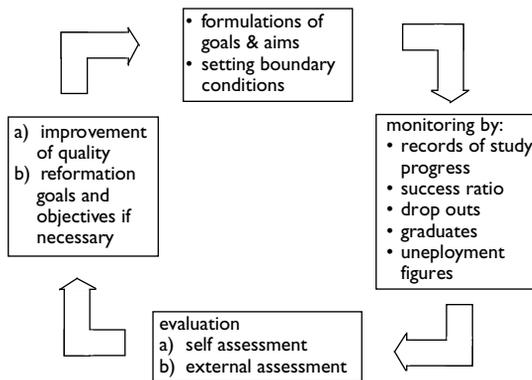


Figure 2: Internal Quality Assurance

The start of quality assurance is not an easy one. Often aims and objectives are taken for granted; they have grown historically and sometimes they are even not written down. Sometimes they are not discussed, but are a loosely coupled set of objectives of the chair-holders’ kingdoms

Therefore, the first task will be to discuss the aims and objectives. This means we have to collect the expectations of the professionals, the students, the labour market, the government and society at large.

As a department, we have to look at all those requirements and translate them in to aims and objectives. Therefore, there is a need to have a committee, responsible for the formulation of the objectives. In this committee all stakeholders should be involved.

Of course, one can never fulfil all expectations of all stakeholders in the same way. Therefore there will always be a discussion about quality. Not because one doesn't deliver quality, but because for example a government is expecting another quality.

Talking about research, it is also important to formulate the objectives of the department and try to formulate the research profile.

If our objectives are based on the expectations of the different stakeholders and we keep in touch with them, we may assume that we are doing the right thing. The next question is "are we doing the right thing in the right way?"

To know the answer, it is important to monitor our activities and now and then evaluate our functioning. First, a good monitoring system is necessary. This contains for example the records of study progress, success ratios, drop outs, number of graduates, (un)employment figures. By using these instrument one can follow input, process and output. With a well-functioning monitoring system, indications of how well our aims and objectives are being realised are always at our disposal. We keep a finger on the pulse and can take action whenever necessary. Has the number of freshmen fallen? What could be the cause? Is the dropout rate increasing? Why? Could it be that the programme is too difficult, or are we not offering what is expected? Is there a high unemployment rate? Why? Does our programme not any longer suit the expectations of society? of the profession?

Regarding research it will be important too to have a monitoring system that follows for example the number of PhDs, the research input, the research output, the funding of the research.

An important instrument for quality development is personnel management. It is important to take care of an active policy regarding our personnel. For example, a department should have formal appraisals or assessments of the staff. Too often it is taken for granted that staff members are doing what we are expecting they will do. However, we have to check that regularly. A department should offer possibilities to staff members for staff development and didactic training. How is the reward system? Are we only rewarding good research or do we reward good teaching too?

While a monitoring system may tell us if there are reasons to worry about our quality or not, a systematic evaluation of our functioning is an important

link in the process of quality assurance. On several occasions a critical self assessment has to be carried out. The results of such evaluation and strengths/ weaknesses analysis should lead to measures which can be taken in order to improve the quality. The bottlenecks and weak points which are identified have to be eliminated.

A well-functioning system of internal quality assessment, though indispensable, is not sufficient. It is important to invite outsiders, peers, to visit the department and to give their opinion about the functioning. The general task of a peer review committee can be summarized as follows:

- The committee reviews information supplied beforehand by the faculty and holds discussions with various individuals on site. On this basis, it reaches conclusions about the standard of education and the quality of the educational process.
- In addition, the committee suggests improvements.

Before a review committee starts an assessment, it must formulate a frame of reference. Every expert has implicit ideas about quality of curriculum or quality of graduates. However, individual frames of reference will differ because of differences in background and experience. Therefore, one of the first tasks of a review committee is to make implicit opinions explicit and formulate a frame of reference acceptable to all committee members.

Against this background, the committee will conduct the assessment. However, the frame of reference is not a sketch of an ideal curriculum but rather an indication of what the committee sees as minimum requirements for a programme. It includes minimum requirements for graduates in for example computer engineering. In formulating the frame of reference, the committee will try to answer the following questions:

- What seems to be the aims and objectives of the curriculum?
- What are the minimum requirements for such a programme, formulated by government, professional bodies and academia?
- What are the minimum requirements regarding knowledge, skills, and attitudes of graduates?

Next to self assessment, peer review is a powerful instrument to use for quality development and for accountability.

2.5 Reflections on the Swedish approach to quality assessment

The remarks and comments made above, are made against the background of developments in the Netherlands. How do they fit in the Swedish situation? The best way to get some idea is by comparing the “Swedish model” with the “Dutch model” (see figure 4). I will beforehand excuse any possible wrong interpretations of the Swedish material or the Swedish situation.

| The Netherlands | Sweden |
|--|---|
| Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (underdegree) programme oriented • centrally organised • nation wide • comparative | Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (underdegree) programme oriented • decentrally organised • individual HEI or consortium • non-comparative |
| Audit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no central organized audits • an institutional audit is the own initiative of a university • programme assessment contains some aspects of auditing | Audit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • institutional audit • centrally organised |
| Accreditation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no accreditation • statement about academic level by experts | Accreditation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accreditation by the National Agency |
| VSNU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsible for external assessment education and research • accountable to the universities • meta-evaluation by inspectorate | The National Agency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsible for audits • responsible for assessment • responsible for accreditation • accountable to the government |
| Accountability & Improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improvement oriented • accountability driven | Accountability & Improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quality development • some degree of accountability |

Figure 4: The Dutch and Swedish approaches compared

The first striking difference is the scope of external quality assessment. The Dutch universities chose in 1986 to partially delegate their individual responsibility for quality assessment to the VSNU. They have chosen for a nationwide, comparative, centrally organised system. In the same time there was a choice of assessment and not for audits, although some elements of audit are incorporated in the assessment. Also the choice has been for programme assessment and not for institutional approach.

In the Swedish situation, the responsibilities are shared between the universities and the National Agency for Higher Education. The programme assessment is carried out by the universities as well as by the national agency. Of course it is possible to organise assessments in a joint venture with other universities. The National Agency for Higher Education is in charge of institutional audits.

The Dutch national, centralized approach has advantages and disadvantages. A centrally organised assessment promotes that curricula in the same field will be assessed with the same criteria. It makes it possible to compare curricula. It offers the institutions the possibility of benchmarking. By assessing similar curricula at all Dutch universities, it is possible to sketch the state-of-the-art in the discipline, nationwide.

In addition to the advantages there are disadvantages too: there is very little or no flexibility at all. There is only a small possibility for tailor-made assessments. The individual university has no possibility of choosing its own time for assessment and has to accept the nationally chosen committee.

An interesting question is whether the Swedish model will be able to combine accountability with improvement. Reading the documents, I encountered some phrases that may have a disrupting influence in the future. I quote:

- “Universities and colleges are thus responsible for providing information on their operations and results”;⁶
- “The individual university or college is responsible for its activities and reporting the results”⁷
- “It is the ambition of the national agency to provide the government and parliament with a comprehensive description and analysis of university quality enhancement throughout the nation”⁸
- “These functions (of the agency for higher education) include publishing evaluation reports that would enable the general public, students and decisions makers to find out about the differences between similar programmes and courses at different universities and colleges.”⁹

Especially the last phrase sounds very familiar and has been received as being important and not threatening for the system. However, nowadays it is strangling external quality assessment. You may have learned from the Dutch developments that overemphasising this aspect may kill the possibilities for quality development.

The outside world, our stakeholders, sometimes forget that the main aim of all efforts in quality assurance is to develop quality and to demonstrate our quality.

2.6 International programme review

To finish, I would like to put some attention to the problem of internationalisation of quality assessment. Nowadays, quality, quality assessment and quality assurance are on the agenda of every university administrator, staff member and student. Looking around Europe we see that higher education has made good progress in the design of external quality assessment mechanism at a national level. However so far we have made very little progress at the European level.

In 1994 and 1995 the European Commission organised a pilot project for quality assessment in higher education. In this project 17 countries and 46 institutions participated. The main aims of the project have been:

- to enhance awareness of the need for quality assessment in higher education;
- to impart a European dimension to quality evaluation;
- to enrich existing national-level quality assessment procedures;
- to contribute to mutual recognition of diplomas and study periods

Summarizing, one may postulate that the project should stimulate the idea of quality assessment and promote an extra dimension by implementing a European dimension. Looking back, we may conclude that the project as such may be called successful. It has in general been positively received. However, there is a lost opportunity. The European Commission has not used the project to introduce a real European dimension in quality assurance and there has been no contribution, or only at a very small scale, to the mutual recognition of diplomas.

Although a nationally based external quality assessment will always be the backbone of quality assurance, we should be aware that it is not possible to restrict it to the national borders.

Looking at the purposes of external quality assessment (improvement, accountability, benchmarking and hallmarking; you may call this last accreditation, validation or certification) it will be clear that a national context is too narrow.

There are several reasons why we should strive at internationalisation of external quality assessment:

- to fight provincialism and nationalism. If we like to have a good opinion about our degree programmes or about our research, it will not be sufficient to involve only national experts. The Netherlands for example is a small country. Everybody knows everybody. Although all experts try to be as independent as possible, a certain risk of inbreeding is present.
- competition; Nowadays, many universities are claiming to strive at excellence and to belong to the top of Europe and even to the top of the world. However, it does not make sense to claim to be excellent and to give yourself a hallmark of top institute. The claim can only be cashed by an external hallmark, placed against a European or international framework.
- student exchange makes it necessary to have a good view on the quality elsewhere. The recognition of diplomas or parts of study programmes can only be done as we have knowledge about content and quality.
- to prevent that the national external quality assessment becomes an instrument in the political discussion of the day. For example in the Netherlands there is still a discussion on the length of a study programme: four years in general and five years in engineering. Many external committees encounter the problem of four years and quality. It is important to know more about such programmes in other countries and by doing so broadening the national political discussion.

So far we have missed an opportunity with the European pilot project, but it is not yet too late. The European universities, or at least some of them, should take the initiative for European cooperation. I believe we should start with the following activities:

- exchange of information
- joint venture with neighbouring countries
- international programme reviews
- a European certification board

2.6.1 Exchange of information

To start with, we should exchange information and experiences with quality assessment. In several countries, there is already a lot of information available about assessed programmes and institutional audits. It is important that quality assessment agencies will exchange experiences. Therefore, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands has taken the initiative for a network of European Assessment Agencies. The first meeting has been in May in Utrecht; in November we will meet in Lisbon. In the months to come there will be an own homepage on Worldwide Web with connections to the national resources. At least you will find on Internet a list of assessed programmes and programmes to be assessed in the near future and abstracts of the assessment reports.

2.6.2 A joint venture with neighbouring countries

A second possibility for the European dimension in quality assessment is to organize quality assessments in a specific Euregion. Next to its own national assessment, it might be very fruitful to organise some assessments together with neighbouring countries. For example the Netherlands, Flanders, Nordrhein-Westfalen and Niedersachsen could organise joint assessments in a special discipline: one committee, with Dutch, German and Belgian members could for example visit two institutions in each country. This should be done in a comparative way and with the aim to learn more about each other's system, not for the sake of ranking. The same can be done for example between the French speaking part of Belgium, Luxembourg and Northern France, between the Scandinavian countries etcetera.

2.6.3 International programme reviews

A third possibility to introduce the European dimension will be to sometimes organise an international programme review, as for example is carried out for Electrical Engineering¹⁰ and for Physical Education¹¹. Because a national assessment does not give a decisive answer about the equivalence of the certificates from the different countries, it will be desirable for special disciplines to come to a European diploma recognition. The method which was used for Electrical Engineering and Physical Education is useful for this purpose. Not all the institutions in a country will need to participate - possibly two would be sufficient. When the diplomas of those two institutions are recognised by an international committee, it is possible by comparing the international outcomes with the outcomes of the national reviews to see how far the other faculties comply with international standards.

Of course, such an international programme review is not easy:

- An international programme review is very complex. Faculties and the experts in the committee must agree on the criteria to be used. For some degree programmes it will be easier than for others.
- Instead of objectivity, national prejudice can play a role.
- An international programme review is a costly and time consuming activity.
- Not all faculties are ready for comparison and publication of the results. Sometimes there will be intense resistance not against such a review but against the publication of the findings.

2.6.4 European certification board

For certain disciplines, accreditation, validation or certification in the framework of Europe will become more and more important. We may think about engineering sciences, medical sciences, dentistry but also for example psychology.

More and more we do hear a call to invite ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology in the US) to come to Europe and to give a statement of “substantial equivalency” for our programmes.

However, higher education in Europe (at least in Western-Europe) should take its own initiative for international accreditation or validation. We should have our own European ABET or ABETS. We do have enough expertise in Europe to realise such a certification board. Such a validation of programmes will be done on a voluntary basis; however, such a hallmark will become important for students and employers. To start with, we do not need to cover all disciplines nor do we need to cover all of Europe. Let makes a start in some disciplines with some universities. For example universities in Germany (or some Länder), Belgium, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries could take the initiative for a European Certification Board for Engineering.

In the years to come, we have to work on the European dimension in quality assessment and quality assurance. We need some European agencies to organise international assessments who are able to give an internationally accepted hallmark to our curricula. Of course, there are problems to realise the European dimension. As said, not everybody in Europe is ready for comparison and publication of the results. This has also been the feelings of

the European Commission during the pilot project for quality assessment in higher education. It has also been the feelings of many member state during the pilot project: people were too afraid for quality judgements and afraid for ranking of European universities.

But, we do not need to be afraid of international programme reviews and joint assessments. Such exercises will offer the universities the possibility for benchmarking, but also for quality development, because it is very instructive to look in other kitchens to see how they are cooking and serving the meal.

Footnotes

- 1) Vroeijstijn, A.I (1995) *Improvement and Accountability, Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, Guide for External Quality Assessment in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- 2) See for example William Bruneau, *Don't fix What's Not broken*. In: Accountability, Canadian Association of university Teachers Bulletin Special edition, Ottawa, May 1996
- 3) Brennan, John (1995). *Quality Management, Quality Assessment and the Decision-making Process*. In: Background papers of the Third Meeting of the INQAAHE. VSNU/Utrecht
- 4) Middelhurts, Robin (1995). *Compatibility or Conflict in National Arrangements?: A UK Perspective*. In: Background papers of the Third Meeting of the INQAAHE. VSNU/Utrecht
- 5) Woodhouse, David (1995). *A Coherent System for external Quality Assurance; A Contribution to the Debate on Improvement V. Accountability*. In: Background papers of the Third Meeting of the INQAAHE. VSNU/Utrecht
- 6) Ibidem, page 18
- 7) Ibidem, page 20
- 8) National Agency for Higher Education, *The National Audit of Higher Education in Sweden*, Report Series 1996:28 R, Stockholm 1996, page 12
- 9) Karl-Axel Nilsson and Hans Näslund, *Towards a Swedish Evaluation and Quality assurance System in Higher Education*. In: Jens-Christian Smeby (ed.). *Evaluation of Higher Education in Nordic Countries*. Nord 1996:6, page 87
- 10) Vroeijenstijn, A.I., B.L.A. Waumans & J. Wijmans (1992). *International Programme Review Electrical Engineering*. Utrecht:VSNU
- 11) Ursprung, Lorenz, Eduard Freitag & Guido Schilling (1995). *European Review of Institutes of Physical Education*. Zürich: Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Sportwissenschaften an der ETH-Zürich, Band 13

3 Transforming higher education:

Students as key stakeholders*

Lee Harvey

3.1 Transforming higher education

At a recent international conference an eminent keynote speaker on 'Higher Education in the Market Place' made the tentative suggestion that students, even 18-year old non-fee paying students, should be taken seriously as stakeholders.

I was appalled. I wasn't appalled so much by the rider he attached that full-time students should pay full-cost fees, and thereby earn the right to be taken seriously, rather, I was appalled that he did not already consider students (fee-paying or not) as a major stakeholder – indeed, as the major stakeholder in higher education.

It is students that makes higher education unique. Higher education is first and foremost about the enhancement and empowerment of students as participants in a process of learning. Even more than that, higher education is about participation in a process of learning for transformation. I shall return to this.

Of course, research and scholarship, training, social criticism and community relationships are all important aspects of the multi-dimensional mission of universities. They are all components of the mix that is unique to universities; that provides the context in which higher-level intellectual development can be nurtured. However, all these other aspects can, and are, carried out by institutions other than universities. Teaching and learning is the core business of higher education. If higher education is to be the transformative process that I shall suggest it must be, then addressing students as the central stakeholder, I will argue, is fundamental for future of the university.

* The paper contains, in part, an abbreviated version of a much more detailed discussion in:

Harvey, L. and Knight, P. T., 1996, *Transforming Higher Education*. Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) and Open University Press. (Publication date: October, 1996)

We have long since passed the point where we merely pay lip-service to student concerns. Higher education is going through a paradigm shift, the élite master-apprenticeship system of initiation into the mysteries, effective for many centuries is now a ludicrous anachronism. Yet it is still practised. There are many for whom the university is still a cloister, disengaged from, and unresponsive to, the wider society. There are those who continue to endorse John Buchan's assertion that 'to live for a time close to great minds is the best kind of education'.

I would not want to imply that higher education should have its mission, purposes and goals determined by the needs of society much less the short-term economic requirements of politicians or employers. I do not find myself greatly enamoured of John Naisbitt's view that: 'in an information society, education is no mere amenity; it is the prime tool for growing people and profits'. Education is rather too commodified in this view, for my taste. It treats education as the manure in which people are passively planted.

None the less, higher education must, I suggest, be responsive to socio-economic developments. More than that, it must be pro-active in these developments. It is to this interrelationship between academia and society that I wish to turn, but, in so doing, address it through the agency of the student.

The world, as we are constantly being told, is changing rapidly (UNESCO, 1995). Higher education has a key role in providing the change agents for the future. Higher education should provide a transformative experience for students, so that they can, themselves, take a leading role in transforming society. This leads me back to the intended double-meaning in my title: higher education must, I contend, itself be transformed if it is to be successful as a transformative process (Harvey and Knight, 1996).

Let me suggest some ways in which higher education might be transformed.

- Shift from teaching to learning.
- Develop explicit skills, attitudes, and abilities as well as knowledge.
- Develop appropriate assessment procedures.
- Reward transformative teaching.
- Encourage discussion of pedagogy.
- Provide transformative learning for academics.
- Foster new collegiality.

- Link quality improvement to learning.
- Audit improvement.

I will deal with each of these in turn, some very much more briefly than others, merely pointing to the sort of transformation that might take place.

3.2 From teaching to learning

The key to that transformation is to reconceptualise the learning process. To move the emphasis from teaching to learning in higher education. To see students as participants in a process – participants to be enhanced and empowered:

- enhanced through the provision of an educational experience that enables the development, and continued improvement, of the knowledge, abilities and skills of students;
- empowered not just to select their own curriculum, nor to monitor the quality of the service they are provided, nor even to construct their own learning contracts – as valuable as all these things are – but empowered as critical, transformative learners.

Rather than the learner as a passive recipient as inferred in Naisbitt's 'manure view', I prefer a view that emphasises the active nature of learning. As Ralph Waldo Emerson adroitly put it: 'what school, college or lectures bring to people depends on what people bring to carry it home in'.

Crucial for transformative higher education is empowerment through the development of students' critical ability, that is, their ability to think and act in a way that transcends taken-for-granted preconceptions, prejudices and frames of reference. (Critical thinking is not to be confused with 'criticism', especially the common-sense notion of negative criticism.)

Developing critical ability is about students having the confidence to assess and develop knowledge for themselves rather than submitting packaged chunks to an assessor who will tell them if it sufficient or 'correct'. An approach that encourages critical ability treats students as intellectual performers rather than as compliant audience. An approach that encourages critical ability transforms teaching and learning into an active process of

coming to understand. It attempts to empower students not just as ‘customers’ in the education process but for life (Harvey and Burrows, 1992).

What does this involve in practice in our universities? Well, it requires, as a starting point, consideration of students as principal stakeholders. It means moving way beyond the mooted possibility of the eminent speaker I mentioned at the start of my talk. It sees empowerment of students as fundamental to the future development of mass higher education.

Transformation is not just about adding to a student’s stock of knowledge or set of skills and abilities. At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context.

3.3 Developing graduate attributes

Higher education develops a variety of attributes in students apart from providing them with a body of academic knowledge. However, there are four problems with the way we operate in higher education:

- non-knowledge-based attributes are rarely made explicit — graduates often do not know how good they are;
- subject knowledge is over-emphasised, to the point that once final examinations are over students often think they have finished learning, rather than just started learning for life;
- students have to develop non-knowledge-based attributes for themselves, academics are often not good at teaching or facilitating the learning of such attributes;
- when knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes are explicitly addressed within higher education they are often viewed in isolation (a reductionist model), seen as add-ons, and things that can be acquired (through a single training event) rather than continuously developed.

I shall, for illustrative purposes, develop a horticultural analogy in which I will frame collections of graduate attributes as flowers. The analogy deliberately frames graduate attributes concretely rather than providing a list of abstract concepts. More to the point, the analogy enables an holistic picture rather than a reductionist fragmentation (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1.

This analogy enables us to see graduate attributes in terms of an integrated set that identifies the ability of graduates to do something. This is not simply pandering to employer-dominated perspectives of higher education – after all, not all practical outputs of higher education are employer fodder. It is, surely, our central aim to produce graduates with the ‘higher-level academic skills of analysis, critique, synthesis, creativity, and so on.

Conversely, it is a mistake to think that employers want higher education graduates trained for their benefit. On the contrary, if they merely want trained personnel they can get them a lot cheaper than by employing graduates. Employers want graduates who are going to take a risk, who are bright and challenging, who can not only deal with change but can lead change.

The ideal candidate would probably have a 2:1 from an absolutely cracking university who is the leader in their field. In addition they will probably have more than two languages, they will probably be captain of rugby or chairman of, say, the Rag Committee, and they will have run a Student Helpline. And, I mean, its just terrifying, there are people like this around. They will have taken a gap year probably between school and university and they will backpack around South America or Asia.

If you say to them, tell us about your year in South America and they say, “well Daddy bought me the flight and Daddy did this”, then generally we are not interested, generally we are much more interested in the person who says: “Oh I flogged my guts out washing cars for six months and got an elastic band airline to Rio and then bussed to Peru”, then we are much more interested in that self-reliant, determined, focused person. (Harvey, et al., 1996)

However, to continue the analogy, it is a mistake to equate the graduate with the flower. On the contrary, the graduate is the horticulturist: growing, nurturing and perfecting a variety of flowers. These flowers are attributes for life, and the lifelong learner is the lifelong gardener. It is important to empower the student – the learner – to cultivate the flowers, to select and present an appropriate bouquet for any circumstance.

We, in universities, must move away from prescribing the exact nature of the perfect, highly cultivated, knowledge variety and instead provide the fertile ground to enable a proliferation of species and new variants.

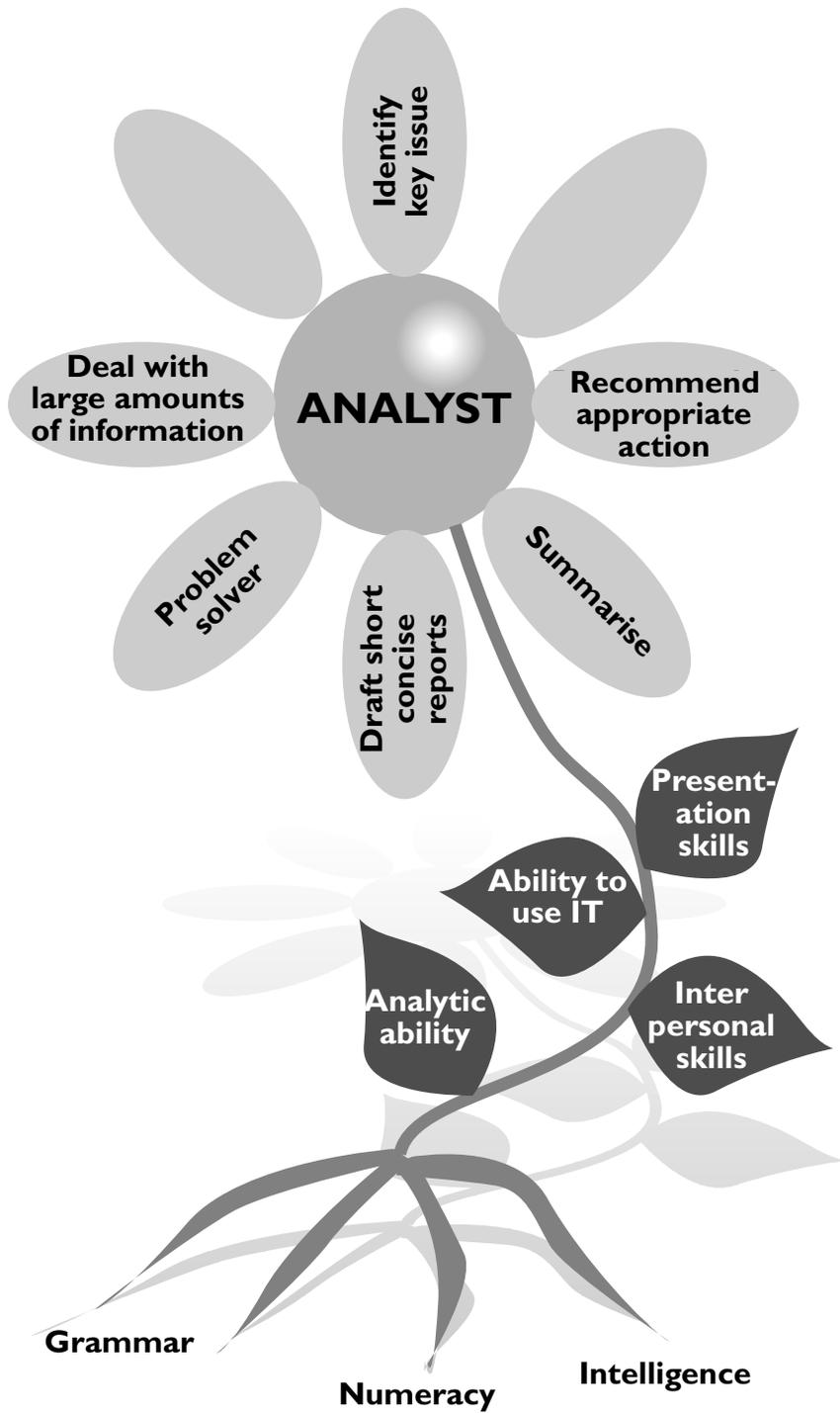


Figure 2.

There are many 'florists', graduate recruiters amongst them, looking for exciting and varied bouquets. The single red rose of knowledge has its moment, but there is a rapidly diminishing demand for it in a rapidly changing world, where knowledge has a short shelf-life, and where the world is no longer head-over-heels in love with higher education. I will pursue the analogy no further at this point, lest my flowers wilt.

If higher education is to play an effective role in education for the 21st century then it must focus its attention on the transformative process of learning. A prime goal should be to transform learners so that they are able to take initiative, work with independence, to choose appropriate frameworks of reference, while being able to see the limitations of those frameworks and to stand outside them when necessary.

To be an effective transformative process, higher education must itself be transformed so that it produces transformative agents: critical reflective learners able to cope with a rapidly changing world.

3.4 Appropriate assessment of students

Assessment of students is a powerful tool in developing learning strategies, if, for example, assessments can be expedited through the adoption of surface techniques (e.g., memorising facts) then the learning is likely to be superficial, lacking a depth of understanding (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Brown and Knight, 1995).

Higher education, I suggest, needs to develop assessment procedures that encourage transformative learning and facilitate the empowerment of the learner. A 'quality' assessment system might include the following features:

- clear curriculum aims;
- transparent expectations of outcomes understood by staff and students;
- assessment of a range of integrated learning outcomes;
- assessment methods should be valid measures of the intended learning outcomes;
- multiple assessment methods to assess multiple aims;
- students must get useful feedback on their work;
- assessment data should inform the processes of continuous quality improvement of learning.

3.5 Rewarding transformative teaching

I would like to see a lot more effort go to encouraging and rewarding transformative teaching – that is, teaching that is planned to bring about learning. Such teaching is a significant element in promoting transformative higher education. Far too often the situation is that reward is inversely related to the amount of time spent teaching:

The average faculty salary ranged from a low of \$34,307 for those who spent more than 70 percent of their time on teaching to a high of \$56,181 for faculty who spent less than 35 percent of their time on teaching. (Ratcliff and associates, 1995, p. iv)

Some institutions are taking teaching seriously in promotion to professorship but those that require explicit, high-level teaching competence are rare. One such is the University of Otago (1995), where the promotion criteria for applicants for professorship are that candidates should demonstrate at least high level competence, and preferably outstanding leadership in teaching, assessment and curriculum development.

However, it is not just establishing a process of rewarding ‘good’ teaching. On the contrary, as I have argued, there is a need to reward good learning facilitation. A key element of this relates to the feedback given to students for assessed work. As students invest considerable effort in assessed work, transformative teaching would, among other things, provide meaningful and varied assessment tasks, clear criteria against which assessments are made and useful feedback to students on assessed work.

3.6 Transformative learning for academics

University academics are rarely trained teachers. In the main they learn ‘on the job’. As such they tend to perpetuate traditional methods: not least lecturing with an emphasis on subject content. They are often ill-equipped to facilitate learning and usually have had no help in developing students skills and abilities beyond those required to assimilate and reproduce knowledge.

It is time we took a professional approach towards the development of academics as facilitators of a range of skills and abilities as well as knowledge. We need to provide professional development that contains the possibility of transformative learning for academics – that, among other things, encourages a shift from teaching to learning.

However, it is crucial, that professional development is projected as positive and enhancing in response to new challenges, rather than as negative and remedial – a reaction to old failings!

3.7 Discuss pedagogy

It is important that pedagogy is a subject that is openly discussed, debated and developed. It is important, for a transformative higher education, that a culture conducive to open discussion of pedagogic processes is encouraged. It is important to overcome the dominant view that sees teaching as a private affair between consenting adults – a member of staff and his or her students.

There are various ways of encouraging such a process, not least by developing a general culture of quality improvement. Management can facilitate this by:

- setting the parameters within which the quality improvement process takes place;
- establishing a non-exploitative, suspicion-free context in which a culture of quality improvement and pedagogic innovation can flourish;
- establishing and ensuring a process of continuous improvement;
- disseminating good practice through an effective and open system of communication;
- encouraging and facilitating team working amongst academic and academic-related colleagues;
- delegating responsibility for quality improvement and pedagogic innovation to staff and students.

3.8 Foster new collegiality

In taking these steps higher education management can also foster a climate of new collegiality. It is, I would argue, a mistake to adopt the consumerist rhetoric in relation to higher education. Higher education is not a product or service to be purchased. It is a process in which people participate. A crucial element of that process is engagement and dialogue, an exchange of knowledge, views and experiences. In short, higher education is at heart a collegial process.

However, universities can no longer retreat into an autonomous collegialism: a revived cloisterism. They must balance autonomy with the political requirements of accountability and a renewed sense of responsibility to stakeholders, not least students.

At the risk of developing a false dichotomy, allow me to briefly characterise cloisterism and new collegialism (Harvey, 1995).

Cloisterism places primary emphasis on academic autonomy. It emphasises the absolute right of the collegial group to make decisions relating to academic matters, regards the integrity of members as inviolable (except where exceptionally challenged from within), and considers the role of the group as that of developing and defending its specialist realm, which is usually discipline-based.

Cloisterism tends to be staff-directed, producer-oriented and research-dominated. It relates to the internal concerns of the group and sees students as novices to be initiated into the mysteries of the discipline. It is effectively inward-looking. The knowledge it possesses is revealed incrementally and according to the dictates of the self-appointed 'owners'. The skills and abilities it expects students to develop are often implicit and obscure. Sometimes what is expected of students is deliberately opaque and shrouded in mystifying discourse.

New collegialism, although sceptical of managerialism, has an outward-looking approach. It sees the collegial group as the forum for academic decision-making but is prepared to enlarge that group to allow discourse and negotiation with significant others, not least students. It emphasises accountable professional expertise rather than the inviolable academic integrity. It perceives its role as one of widely disseminating knowledge and understanding through whatever learning-facilitation and knowledge-production processes are most effective (Knight, 1994).

New collegialism is responsive to changing circumstances and requirements. It is learning-oriented. It focuses on facilitating student learning rather than teaching, and explicitly encourages the development of a range of skills and abilities. It prefers transparency to obfuscation. It values team work.

Of course, these characterisations are rarely so clear-cut nor evident in practice. They represent two ends of a continuum, and are summed up in Table 1.

| Cloisterism | New collegialism |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Secretive | Open |
| Isolationist | Networking |
| Individual | Team work |
| Defence | Responsive |
| Traditional approach | Innovative |
| Producer-oriented | Participant-oriented |
| Clings to power | Empowering |
| Wary of change | Welcomes change |
| Elitist | Open access |
| Implicit quality criteria | Explicit quality criteria |
| Information provider | Facilitates active learning |

Table 1: Comparison of cloisterism and new collegialism

3.9 Link quality improvement to learning

At a system level, we need to shift emphasis from quality as accountability to quality as transformation – linking quality improvement to learning.

Transformation is dependent on the dialectical interrelationship between the individual academic and the higher education system, mediated by the institutional infrastructure, cross-cut by disciplinary allegiances. This complexity comes to the fore when we consider two issues that currently loom large in higher education:

- quality;
- innovation in pedagogy.

They are important, internationally, because of the impact of increasing student numbers and decreasing levels of resourcing, of increasing demands being laid on higher education to ensure economic competitiveness in a global market and pressure to ensure internationally comparable standards of courses.

Yet there is little evidence that quality monitoring and innovations in teaching and learning are pulling in the same direction (Figure 3). At the institutional level, quality monitoring procedures and innovation in teaching and learning interface, if at all, through the dissemination of good practice.

EQM and Learning

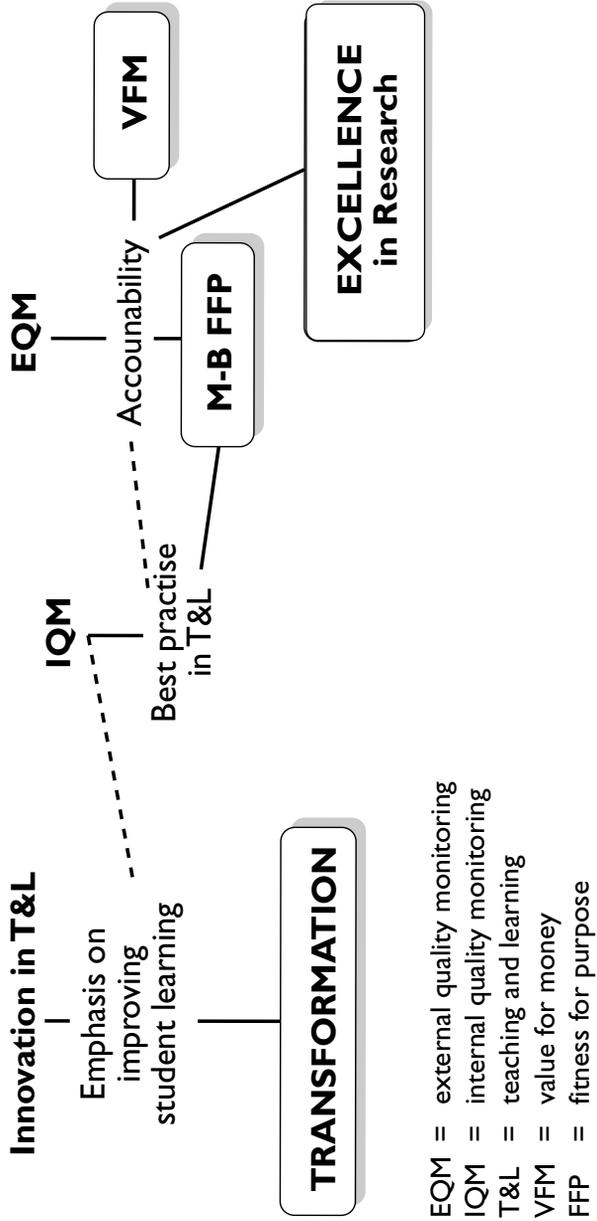


Figure 3.

External quality monitoring (EQM), the form in which quality is most readily made tangible, makes no attempt, in most countries, to encourage quality learning. On the contrary it tends to be conservative, driven by accountability requirements.

I would not wish to deny that such accountability can lead to reform of teaching, learning and the curriculum. However, it is not a direct influence on the quality of learning nor is it likely to have a sustained impact. Indeed, EQM ought to carry a health warning. Accountability may damage learning by diverting academic staff's attention away from the improvement of learning, to compliance with the bureaucratic imperative and to attempts to improve performance on indicators that are, at the very best, poor operationalisations of learning quality.

I doubt I would be accused of being overly cynical should I harbour the suspicion that accountability procedures are underpinned by an imperative to make higher education more cost-efficient, rather than to improve the quality of learning.

However, research has suggested that key stakeholders in higher education (students, graduates, teachers, administrators, employers) have a definite view that quality is related to the learning process (Harvey, 1993). That is not to say that they are unmindful of funding considerations, but rather to observe that, for them, the test of quality lies in the experiences of learning.

Students and staff emphasise the process of learning, while employers and graduates emphasise desirable outcomes. The two are not incompatible, nor, indeed, do employer preferences pose any threat to the academic integrity of degree courses or to academic freedom. The qualities that employers seek are ones that can be advanced by using certain ways of working within degree programmes and by ensuring that a good range of learning activities is provided.

I am convinced that in Sweden you have learned a lot from the mistakes and ill-thought out systems in other countries. I think the process being developed by the National Agency provides a real opportunity to:

- focus primarily on improvement rather than accountability;
- relate quality improvement to the enhancement of student learning.

In the end, this approach requires structured encouragement of a process of continuous quality improvement driven by those who can make an impact at the staff-student interface. In short, it requires a process of improvement that is owned and controlled from the bottom-up but inspired and monitored from the top-down.

I think, in Sweden that you have the potential to link quality and learning. I suggested, on a recent visit to three very different Swedish higher education institutions that the Swedish approach is characterised by the following:

- improvement orientation;
- centred on local responsibility;
- non-prescriptive, encourages a variety of methods;
- requires minimum necessary information;
- emphasises practical results and operational feedback;
- driven bottom-up rather than top-down.

There was general agreement with all of these except the last, where it was felt that potentially, the system would emphasise bottom-up control but currently it was rather heavily lead by top-down initiatives.

3.10 Audit improvement.

In most countries there is a need to move from assessing provision to auditing improvement. You can build this in from the outset in Sweden. In countries like Britain, we need a more forward looking, less burdensome approach. My own institution is faced with a plethora of internal and external quality and standards processes involving an enormous network of information flows (Figure 4).

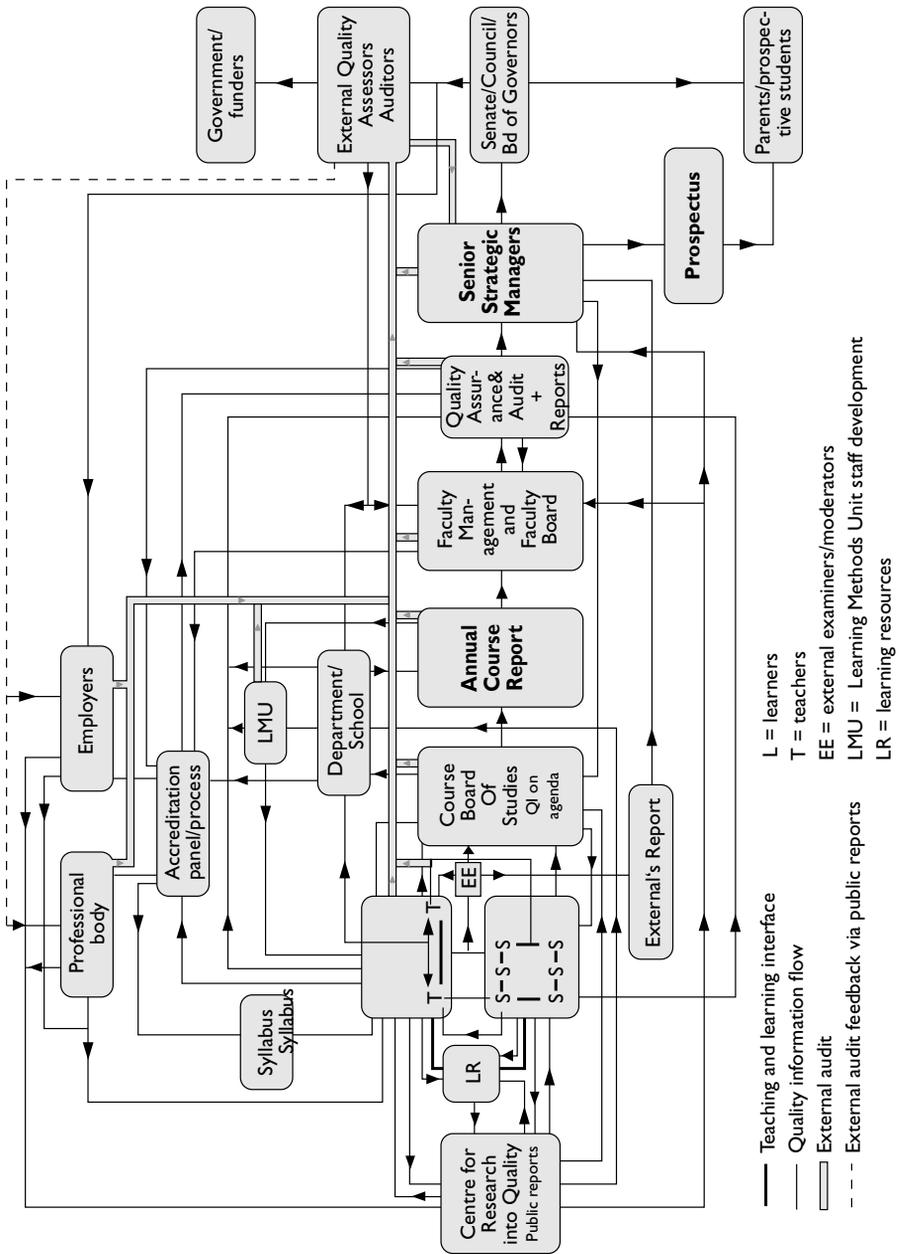


Figure 4.

I would like to suggest a simple system of external quality monitoring (EQM) that places emphasis on a process of continuous improvement driven by the people who can effect real change – the teachers, students and learning support staff.

What might this look like? First, we need to make a clear distinction between quality and academic standards. Academic standards should remain the preserve of academics within institutions supported, where appropriate by external examiners and professional and regulatory bodies. Second, quality should be subject to a single system. One that audits continuous improvement rather than assesses existing provision or procedures.

Research, discussion and anecdote from around the world illustrates that the most significant element of existing EQM methodologies is self-assessment, which promotes a process of open, responsive collegial reflection on purpose, procedures and practice (Karlsen and Stensaker, 1995; Rasmussen, 1995; Rear, 1994; Rovio-Johansson and Ling, 1995; Saarinen, 1995). This element, more than such things as peer review and statistical indicators, offers the basis for a bottom-up process of continuous quality improvement (CQI) combined with top-down internal and external audit.

The key to a new approach is to identify meaningful teams operating at the learner-teacher interface. These teams should own and set a continuous improvement agenda. Each team, for example a group of staff teaching a 'course' along with student representatives, would set a quality improvement agenda. Rather than the typical course annual report – a retrospective account, written by a tired course director at the end of an academic year that gets filed away and forgotten until the next report has to be written – the continuous quality improvement agenda would be a team-written document at the start of the year identifying not what had happened but what improvements will be made in the forthcoming twelve months. Each year the effectiveness and outcomes of last year's improvements strategy would be evaluated and a new twelve-month strategy initiated.

Each team-based CQI agenda would be subject to a 360 degree review by the appropriate dean or head of services, by students and by other teams within the same faculty (Figure 5). This process of 360 degree review would lead not only to the projection of sensible and manageable strategies for improvement but also act as a check on the veracity of improvement claims.

Suggested improvement audit structure

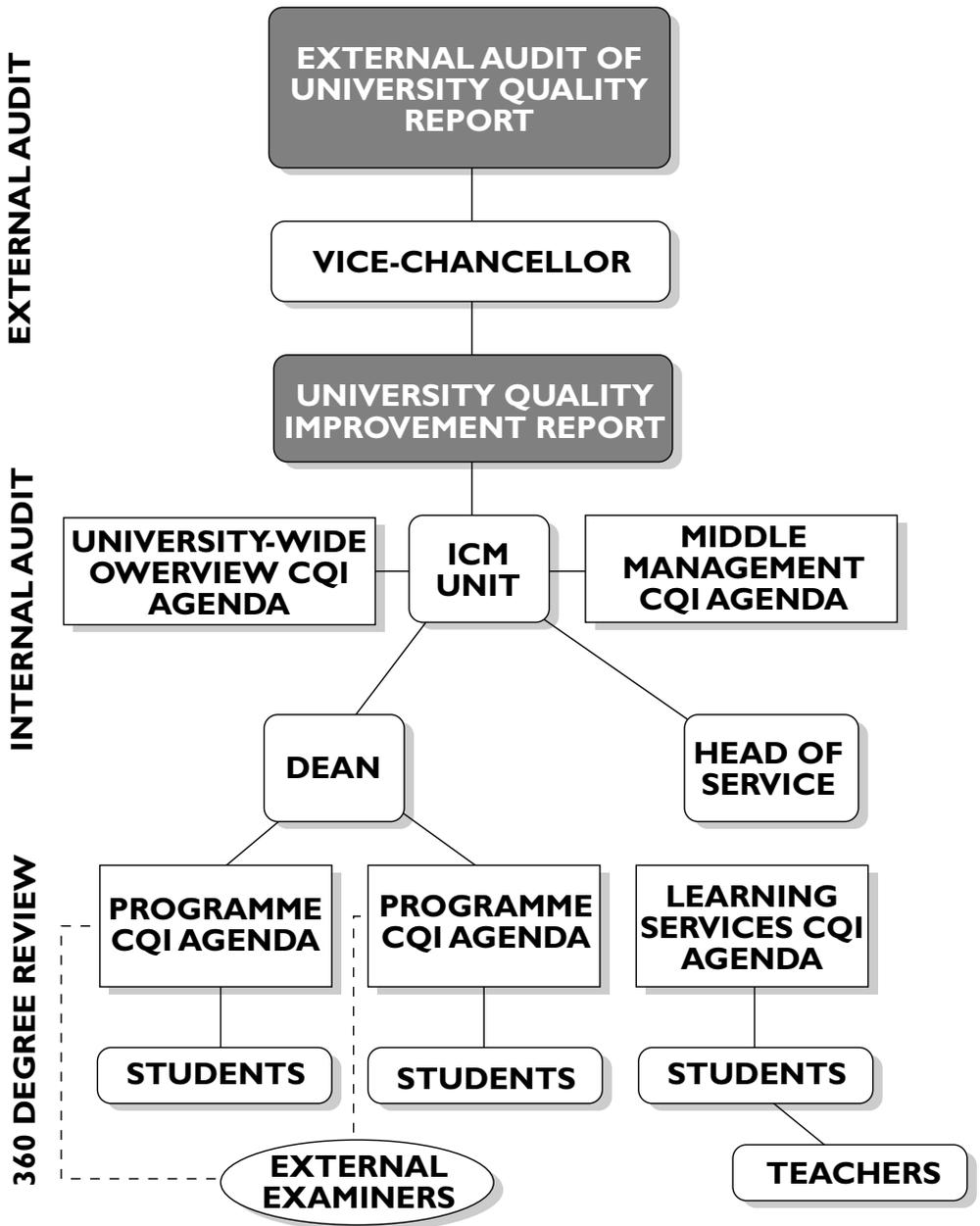


Figure 5.

A central internal quality monitoring (IQM) unit collates the reports (including, if appropriate one from the deans and heads of services acting as a middle-management team, subject to a similar 360 degree review). Where there may be concern about the veracity of any report, they should undertake an audit using whatever procedure is appropriate to confirm the content. The unit may also wish to undertake periodic or random audits. A university-wide overview and improvement strategy (including long-term plans), produced by a senior management team including the Vice-Chancellor, would be added to the team reports and the composite document would constitute the university quality report.

This would be the sum total of the quality documentation produced by the institution on an annual basis. EQM would then involve an audit of this quality report in much the same way that the financial accounts are audited. This may occur on an annual, periodic or random basis. Such audits may include inspections, peer review, reference to documentation or statistical indicators as appropriate but would focus entirely on improvement agendas and would comment on the veracity of claims, the appropriateness of the strategy and highlight good practice. The institution quality report and the audit report would be published documents.

This process is simple, emphasises continuous improvement, places the onus on those who can affect change, and gives them ownership and control while engendering a responsive and responsible approach. Accountability approaches have been successful in initiating a quality culture, it is now time for a quantum leap into a new improvement -led approach that will be sustainable in the diverse and radically different system of higher education in the 21st Century.

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4 To innovate for quality

Frans van Vught

4.1 Intrinsic and extrinsic qualities

In several publications in the literature on higher education, a well-known citation is found from Clark Kerr's *The Uses of the University*. In this citation Kerr stresses the historical persistence of higher education institutions.

About eighty-five institutions in the Western World established by 1520 still exist in recognisable forms, with similar functions and unbroken histories, including the Catholic church, the parliaments of the Isle of Man, Iceland and Great Britain, several Swiss cantons, and seventy universities. Kings that rule, feudal lords with vassals, and guilds with monopolies are gone. These seventy universities, however, are still in the same locations with some of the same buildings, with professors and students doing much the same things, and with governance carried on in much the same ways (Kerr, 1982, p.152).

Higher education institutions apparently have a remarkable capability to adapt to the changing conditions with which they are confronted. I would like to argue that the historical persistence of higher education institutions is an effect of the well-balanced combination of – what I shall call – the extrinsic and the intrinsic qualities of higher education.

The extrinsic qualities refer to the capacities of higher education institutions to respond to the changing needs of the societies of which they are part. Already during the first decades of their Medieval existence were higher education institutions able to adapt to the needs and opportunities in their environment. "The burgeoning of the universities in Medieval Europe was itself a response to the needs of the expanding urban life and the particular demands of the type of society coming consequently into existence...." (Williams, 1989, p.38; see also Cobban, 1975). Through the centuries higher education institutions have been able to provide at least part of the products and services their environment asked for, and these products and services have been sufficient for higher education institutions to capture their persistent place in history.

The intrinsic qualities of higher education refer to the basic values and ideals which form the very heart of higher education: the unfettered search for truth and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Through the centuries higher education institutions have remained loyal to these basic values and ideals, even when their environment tended to be somewhat hostile to them. And exactly this loyalty has compelled general respect and admiration for higher education institutions.

During their long years of existence the extrinsic and intrinsic qualities of higher education institutions have also been addressed in the various approaches to quality control. With the concept of 'quality control' I here refer to the general mechanisms and procedures that have been, or are being, used in order to assure that the products and processes of higher education institutions are of sufficient quality. Already in medieval higher education, general approaches to quality control are found in which the extrinsic and intrinsic qualities appear to play a major role. As an example of each of the two categories of quality, let me briefly present two extreme models of medieval quality control. Neither of these two extreme models is found in the actual history of higher education. However, the two models hopefully illustrate how, in the approaches to quality control, the emphasis on extrinsic or intrinsic qualities may be very different.

One model could be called – in the words of the historian Cobban –: "the French practice of vesting control in an external authority" (Cobban, 1988, p. 124). The other model is the typical English model of a self-governing community of fellows.

The French model can be illustrated with the dramatic struggle for autonomy by the University of Paris in the early thirteenth century. It was the chancellor of the cathedral of Nôtre Dame, acting as the delegate of the bishop of Paris, who represented the then dominating episcopal outlook that the universities should be seen as 'ecclesiastical colonies'. The universities were viewed as higher forms of education that were however to be integrated in the ecclesiastical structure and that were to remain under episcopal authority. The chancellor of the cathedral of Nôtre Dame was an external official set above the masters' guild. As such he claimed the authority to grant or to withhold the teaching license and he claimed the right to decide about the content of studies. The masters fought the chancellor's authority. And after a long and bitter conflict, Pope Gregory IX in his bull called *Parens*

Scientiarum (1231) finally made an end to the dominance of the bishop and the chancellor over the masters' guild (Cobban, 1975, p. 76-84).

The English model of self-governance has its origins in the aspirations of the masters at the medieval Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to be completely independent of external jurisdiction. English medieval colleges were sovereign, self-governing communities of fellows. "In every college founded before 1500, with the exception of King's Hall, Cambridge, the right of electing the warden, master, president, and provost was conferred by statute on the fellows themselves. Although the results of these elections usually required confirmation by an external authority, such as the bishop of the diocese or the university chancellor, where this was so, it was normally stipulated that the confirmation was to be of nominal character" (Cobban, 1988, p. 124). In the English colleges the *committee* (which is the collective body of all the members of the board of the foundation) had the right to remove unsuitable masters and to co-opt new members. It was up to the community of the fellows to judge the quality of their colleagues.

The French model may be considered to be the archetype of quality control in terms of accountability. In the French model the power to decide what should be studied and who could be allowed to teach at the university was in the hands of an external authority. The guild masters were accountable to the chancellor for the contents of their teaching. The English model is the expression of what we nowadays call quality assessment by means of peer review. The masters decided among themselves what should be taught and who should teach.

4.2 The concept of quality

Although it is widely being discussed, the concept of quality in higher education often remains vague and unspecified. Quality seems to be an elusive concept in higher education. Universal agreement on the meaning of the concept or a generally acceptable answer regarding its definition seems very difficult to reach. Let us look at a few of the general conceptions and approaches in the literature.

Barnett (1992, p.16) claims that the concept of quality in higher education is to a large extent the result of the normative positions we may have regarding higher education: "...what we mean by, and intend by, 'quality' in

the context of higher education is bound up with our values and fundamental aims *in* higher education. We cannot adopt a definite approach towards quality in this sphere of human interaction without taking up a normative position, connected with what we take higher education ultimately to be. In turn, what we take higher education to be will have implications for how we conceive of quality, how we attain it, how we evaluate our success in achieving it, and how we improve it". Taking Barnett's position even further, quality, I would like to argue, should be seen as a multi-dimensional and subjective concept. The assessment of what is, and what is not, good quality depends upon the objectives and criteria a person or group judges to be relevant in a specific context. In this sense, there are as many 'qualities of higher education' as there are sets of objectives and criteria that can be related to higher education. Maybe the only general definition of quality is indeed, as Ball (1985) has stated, 'fitness for purpose'. Trying to formulate what quality is in higher education implies first of all specifying the purposes that are assumed to be relevant by specific sectors in a specific context.

Quality, I think, should be approached from a *nominalist* point of view (Popper, 1983). Instead of trying to find the essential aspects of the quality-concept (as the *essentialist* perspective would do), we should accept that there is no definitive and final description of quality and that trying to find such a description is a rather unfruitful exercise (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). The nominalist approach leaves the disturbing question what quality really is aside and acknowledges that "there are as many definitions of quality in higher education as there are stakeholders times the number of purposes, or dimensions, these stakeholders distinguish" (Brennan et al., 1992, p. 13).

The literature offers various further conceptions of and approaches to quality control in higher education. One of these is the so-called *objectivist* conception of quality. The assumption underlying this approach is that it is possible to identify and measure certain aspects of higher education, and that the same assessment can be used in all relevant circumstances. The objectivist conception implies that by "using a common methodology across the system, by looking at the same aspects and quantifying them in the same way, an objective measure of quality results" (Barnett, 1992, p. 46).

The objectivist conception conflicts with the nominalist definition of quality as 'fitness for purpose' presented above. Rather than an objectivist conception a relativist point of view seems to be the obvious conception of

quality in higher education. The central assumption of the relativist conception is that there are no absolute and definite criteria at hand by which quality can be assessed. Quality in higher education can be assessed in as many ways as there are sets of objectives and criteria and there can be no claim to quality without the specification of those objectives and criteria (cf. Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993).

In a recent survey and analysis of the literature on quality in higher education, Dill (1992) distinguishes three approaches to quality control: the reputational approach, the student outcomes approach and the total quality approach.

The *reputational approach* uses the mechanism of peer review to assess (and often rate) the quality of programmes and institutions. It will be clear that the reputational approach is mainly related to the intrinsic qualities of higher education. In the reputational approach the mechanism of peer review is the basic instrument to judge the quality of processes and products. The mechanism of peer review has often been criticised (for an overview of the critique, see Van Vught, 1991). However, as Becher (1989, p.64) argues, the choice for peer review is like the choice for parliamentary democracy: "Most of those who advocate parliamentary democracy as a method of government are prepared to acknowledge its manifold weaknesses: their defence of it rests on the claim that there is no preferable alternative. So too, it can be argued, the exercise of peer group judgement must be tolerated, for all its admitted faults, because no one has yet come up with an approach for academic evaluation that would not be discernibly worse". Especially in the U.S. the mechanism of peer review is used to produce ratings of institutions and programmes. These institutional and programme ratings have been analysed to identify possible indicators (and predictors) of quality. However, it appears that the indicators are highly intercorrelated and the halo effect is difficult to avoid.

The *(student) outcomes approach* is based on the measurement of outcomes indicators, like the proportion of students completing doctoral degrees, the persistence rate of an institution's undergraduates, the lifetime earnings of the alumni of a programme, etcetera. The outcomes assessment approach appears to be gaining influence in several countries, especially in the U.K. and the U.S. It should be pointed out, however, that the outcomes approach is based on an essentialist and objectivist conception of academic quality.

Besides, there are also questions raised regarding the usefulness of this approach. Astin (1991, p IX), for instance, claims that "although a great deal of assessment activity goes on in America's colleges and universities, much of it is of very little benefit to either students, faculty administrators, or institutions". Regarding this approach the criticism is also that the outcomes studies are difficult to interpret because of intercorrelations with reputational measures and the fact that differences in outcomes are often largely attributable to differences in (student) inputs.

The *total quality approach* is based on the idea of quality as 'the absence of errors' and is inspired by Deming's guidelines for a quality oriented management approach in industry (Deming, 1986). According to Dill (1992) this approach consists of six themes:

- the imperative of constant and continuous improvement of quality;
- the emphasis on obtaining consistent quality in incoming resources through the careful management of suppliers;
- the active participation of all members of an organisation in the improvement of quality;
- the meeting of customers' needs as the basis for improving products and services;
- the need for cooperation and coordination;
- the improvement of quality through the continuous design of the processes of production.

Dill argues that the first three themes are broadly compatible with the culture of higher education institutions but that the latter three themes clearly challenge academic norms. The total quality approach stresses broad participation, client orientedness, organisational learning and coordination. So far, the total quality approach has not yet been widely used in higher education. However, it may offer some interesting perspectives for a quality management approach at the institutional level of higher education.

Overlooking the literature on quality in higher education, I would like to argue that the nominalist and relativist conceptions are to be preferred. Objective and absolute indicators (including outcomes indicators) cannot offer sufficient information to convince all possible actors in higher education systems (all having their own specific sets of aims and criteria).

Besides, also in our present-day approaches to quality in higher education the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic qualities should be kept in mind. For the intrinsic qualities the mechanism of peer review is indispensable. Evaluation by one's academic peers is at the heart of the academic enterprise. It is closely related to the basic ideals of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge. "Academic knowledge simply does not count as knowledge without it having been subjected to some kind of peer evaluation" (Barnett, 1992, p. 123). Peer review therefore should be a mechanism in any system of quality control in higher education.

But also the extrinsic qualities of higher education should be addressed in our present-day quality control systems. A quality control system which only takes place by means of collegial peer review without any reference to the needs outside the higher education system, runs the risk of an extreme isolationism of higher education institutions from the rest of society, and thus implies the danger of the denial of the legitimacy of their existence.

The dimension of the extrinsic qualities of higher education focuses our attention on the concept of 'accountability'. Accountability means the requirement to demonstrate responsible actions to one or more external constituencies. However, it is not immediately clear who should be seen as the 'external constituencies'. Higher education can be held accountable to several audiences: governments providing funds to higher education, students following the programmes and courses that are being offered by higher education institutions, employers offering jobs to the graduates of these institutions and clients commissioning research projects or specific training courses. "... [H]igher education institutions are accountable to students and their families, to employers and taxpayers who pay a substantial (...) proportion of the bills. There is a social and political accountability which is concerned with issues such as ensuring that higher education is accessible to those who are likely to be able to benefit from it. There is financial accountability which is concerned with promise and performance and the relationship between them" (Williams & Loder, 1990, p. 3).

It has been argued that the concept of accountability has two distinct dimensions: *discharging* assigned missions effectively and *demonstrating* that these responsibilities have in fact been discharged (Ewell, 1987). Following this line of reasoning, it can be suggested that the aspects of quality control systems that are related to the extrinsic qualities of higher education imply

the demonstration of results in the light of the objectives of each constituency to which an institution or programme claims to owe accountability.

4.3 The recent call for quality control

Since the early 1980s quality has become a central concept in many higher education systems. In the United States several state governments started their efforts to improve the quality of higher education through outcomes assessment legislation (Astin, 1991; Ewell, 1991; Newman, 1987). In the United Kingdom (in 1984) Sir Keith Joseph declared that the principal objectives for higher education should be 'quality' and 'value for money'. In France in the same year the *Comité National d'Evaluation* was set up. In the Netherlands a governmental policy-paper was published (in 1985) called 'Higher Education: autonomy and quality'. In Denmark, Spain, Sweden and various other countries, the first steps were taken to design a quality control system (Kells, 1989; Neave & Van Vught, 1991; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). In Central and Eastern Europe several countries have recently put quality control systems into place.

There are various factors that can explain this recent increase of the attention to quality in higher education. An important factor is the expansion of the higher education systems. The rapid growth of the student body and the accompanying increase in the number of fields of study (especially in the social sciences), departments and even whole new institutions have triggered questions about the amount and direction of public expenditure for higher education. Another (related) factor lies in the simple fact that the limits of public expenditure have been reached in many countries. Budget-cuts and retrenchment operations automatically lead to questions about the relative quality of processes and products in higher education. A third factor concerns the transition process to technology-based economies, which in many countries brings along policies to guide student demand to fields that are perceived to be important for further economic development (Neave, 1986, p. 168).

These factors indicate that during the last ten years or so, especially the *extrinsic* qualities of higher education have driven governments to policies of quality control in higher education. The increasing costs of higher education systems had to be legitimised by clearly definable societal benefits. And for this, mechanisms and procedures of quality control were thought to be necessary.

In Western Europe several governments appear to be stepping back in their higher education policies from 'the strategy of rational planning and control' to the 'strategy of self-regulation' (van Vught, 1993). The strategy of rational planning was widely used in the Western European systems of higher education during the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Since then, and particularly on the European continent, things have changed.

Until the second half of the 1980s, detailed government planning and control was clearly the dominant approach to the steering of higher education systems in Western Europe. In countries like, for example, Germany, France and Italy governments passed a considerable number of laws and decrees to regulate the dynamics of the higher education systems, and mechanisms of quantitative planning were used to adjust the output of the higher education system to the (perceived) needs of the labour market (Neave & van Vught, 1991).

But a new governmental strategy has emerged on the Western European continent: the strategy of self-regulation. Crucial to this strategy is the increased weight assigned to the autonomy of higher education institutions and the withdrawal of government from detailed regulation and control. Examples of this new strategy are found in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, while several other countries appear to be moving in the same direction (Neave & van Vught, 1991; Goedegebuure, et al., 1993).

Similarly, in Central and Eastern Europe several governments have indicated that they want to increase the autonomy of higher education institutions, while limiting themselves to an approach of general oversight. In several countries (amongst them the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) the new strategy of self-regulation can clearly be recognised.

The stepping back of government in both Western and Central/Eastern Europe appears to be related to a growing attention for quality control in higher education. While stepping back, governments in many countries have either themselves taken the initiative to develop a quality control system or have urged higher education institutions to do so. For many governments one of the crucial conditions for their stepping back was (and is) the coming into existence of a generally accepted and applied quality control system in higher education.

In the United States the various national reform reports published in the mid-1980s have inspired several state governments to increase their steering behaviour with respect to higher education institutions, certainly in the field of quality control. Examples are: the performance funding project of Tennessee, the performance accountability plan of Maryland, the college outcomes evaluation program of New Jersey and the academic skills program of Texas. According to Newman, 'there is indeed a tendency for states to intrude and, in fact, for the universities to cause or invite that intrusion' (Newman, 1987, p. XIII). The new Higher Education Act (1993) only appears to intensify this process. Contrary to the European countries, in the U.S. State governments, and recently also the federal government, appear to increase their steering intensity of higher education institutions. "While at the beginning of the 1980s only 3 or 4 states had initiated outcomes assessment programmes, by 1991, 27 states had implemented a programme, and an additional dozen states are expected to enact programmes in the next five years" (Dill, 1992, p. 53).

As was suggested before, the growing government interest in quality control systems in Europe and the United States is a clear expression of the growing attention for especially the extrinsic qualities of higher education. It shows that our modern higher education systems have entered what Barnett calls 'the age of *disenchantment*': "... society is no longer prepared to accept that higher education is self-justifying and wishes to expose the activities of the secret garden. With greater expectations being placed on it, higher education is being obliged to examine itself or be examined by others" (Barnett, 1992, p. 216).

A crucial question is whether the institutions of higher education will react to these rising expectations. Will higher education institutions respond to the call to show their extrinsic qualities, without forgetting their intrinsic qualities of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge? And: what could be the role of government in this respect? How should government address higher education institutions, if it wants to stimulate their attention for extrinsic qualities?

4.4 Fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions

Before we can identify a sensible way for governments to stimulate higher education institutions to respond to the call to show their extrinsic qualities while at the same time keeping their intrinsic qualities in mind, we should first ask ourselves what, from an organisational and an administrative point of view, higher education institutions are like. What are some of the more fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions?

Perhaps the most important aspect of higher education institutions is that they are engaged in the production and transmission of knowledge. If there is anything fundamental to higher education, it is this central concept of knowledge. In higher education systems knowledge is discovered, conserved, transmitted and applied. "If it could be said that a carpenter goes around with a hammer looking for nails to hit, then a professor goes around with a bundle of knowledge (...) looking for ways to augment it or to teach it to others" (Clark, 1983a, p. 12).

The primacy of the handling of knowledge is related to the basic institutional appearance of higher education. Because of their basic orientation towards knowledge, higher education institutions, at whatever location in place and time, all have a number of fundamental characteristics. I would like to explore these characteristics briefly (van Vught, 1993).

A first characteristic concerns the authority of the academic professional experts. In higher education institutions many decisions can only be made by these professional experts. These are the decisions regarding the detailed knowledge-oriented academic activities of research and teaching. In all those specialised knowledge-fields, which are held together in a higher education institution, decisions on what and how to investigate, and on what and how to teach, come to a large extent under the direct supervision of the academic experts. Only they are able to oversee their specialised fields. Only they are able to stimulate the enthusiasm of students for specific objects of study. This is why professional autonomy is so important in higher education institutions and this is why these institutions are called 'professional bureaucracies' (Mintzberg, 1979).

Clark makes it clear how the professionals in higher education organisations work with and upon knowledge:

The factory floor in higher education is cluttered with bundles of knowledge that are attended by professionals. The professionals push and pull on their respective bundles. If they are doing research, they are trying to increase the size of the bundle and even to reconstitute it. If engaged in scholarship other than research, they are conserving, criticising, and reworking it. If teaching, they are trying to pass some of it on the flow-through clientele we call students, encouraging them to think about its nature, how it may be used, and perhaps take up a career devoted to it. If engaged outside the 'plant' as advisors, consultants, or lecturers, academics further disseminate knowledge to try to draw out its implications for practical use. (Clark, 1983b. p. 20).

Of course, not all decisions in higher education institutions are made by professionals. There is a category of purely 'administrative' decisions (for example, regarding financial administration and 'support services') which to a large extent is beyond the professional influence. There is also a category of decisions which are mainly taken by 'clients' (students, research contractors). And there is an important category of decisions mainly taken by 'outsiders' (government, funding agencies, evaluating committees). Nevertheless, the influence of the professional experts in the decision-making processes in higher education institutions is extensive. In many decisions made at these institutions professionals play an important role.

A second important characteristic is the organisational principle that in higher education institutions the knowledge areas form the basic foci of attention. The knowledge areas are the 'building blocks' of a higher education organisation and without some institutionalisation of these knowledge areas a higher education organisation cannot exist. This principle leads to the typical organisational structure of higher education institutions. Fragmentation is abundant in these organisations. Throughout the organisation specialised cells exist which are only loosely coupled. Higher education institutions are 'loosely coupled systems' (Weick, 1976). The crucial knowledge oriented activities take place within the rather autonomous cells. Specialists in specific knowledge fields group together to teach and undertake research. To a large extent insulated from the rest of the organisation, these specialists use their autonomy and expertise to perform the basic activities of the higher education institutions. "... [S]pecialised professionals have little need to relate to one another within the local shop (...) They can produce on their own (...) Producing separately for the most part, the many groups become an extreme case of loosely-linked production.

The university is a gathering place for professionalised crafts, evermore a confederation, a conglomerate, of knowledge-bearing groups that require little operational linkage” (Clark, 1983b, p. 21).

A final characteristic of higher education institutions worth mentioning here is the extreme diffusion of the decision making power. In an organisation where the production processes are knowledge-intensive, there is a need to decentralise. When besides that, such an organisation is also heavily fragmented, the decision-making power will be spread over a large number of units and actors. A higher education institution therefore becomes a federal system; ”semi-autonomous departments and schools, chairs and faculties act like small sovereign states as they pursue distinctive self-interests and stand over against the authority of the whole” (Clark, 1983a p. 266, 267).

Their fundamental characteristics (the authority of the professional experts, the organisational fragmentation and the diffusion of the decision making power) may to a large extent explain the miraculous adaptability and historical persistence of higher education institutions. These characteristics offer higher education institutions a high level of redundancy which implies that they can react to many different environmental conditions, including those that are the result of their own partial failures (Landau, 1969). Clark argues that it is the peculiar internal constitution of universities that allows them ”... to bend and adapt themselves to a whole variety of circumstances and environments thus producing diversity among universities (...) and, at the same time to maintain an appearance of similarity that allows us to recognise them in all the guises which they take” (Clark, 1983a, p. 186, 187).

From the organisational literature it has been argued that higher education institutions can be seen as cybernetic organisations (Birnbaum, 1988; Hardy et al., 1983). According to this point of view the organisational fragmentation and the diffusion of the decision-making power are characteristics that allow a higher education institution to act as a self-regulating organisation, in which decisions are taken by rather autonomous decentralized units.

The perspective of cybernetics suggests that every organisational unit tries to keep a limited number of ‘critical variables’ within tolerable ranges. Only if one or more critical variables take on values that exceed these ranges, actions are undertaken. In the cybernetic perspective each decision-making unit

addresses its own relevant variables. In this sense the cybernetic organisation consists of a multiplicity of actors, each of them operating as rather autonomous decision-makers.

At the level of the overall organisation, the central decision-makers limit their activities to monitoring *their* critical variables. These variables regard the performance of the organisation as a whole. When one or more of these variables are judged to take on unacceptable values, the central decision-makers design and implement policies to stimulate the decentralized decision-makers to change their behaviour. The regulating activities of the central decision-makers thus are limited to monitoring the performance of the overall system of the decentralised decision-making units and to evaluating (and if judged necessary, trying to change) the behaviour which creates this performance.

The cybernetic perspective appears to offer a conceptional framework with respect to decision making that fits the fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions. In addition -as will be argued below- it allows us to design a strategy for governments that could stimulate these institutions to pay attention to their extrinsic qualities.

4.5 Governmental strategies

During the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s public policy-making in the field of higher education in Europe was marked by a growing penetration of government into the 'private life of higher education' (Trow, 1975) as various Western European governments drew up and implemented policies which decreased the autonomy both of institutions and of professionals working in them. This trend is related to the rapid expansion of European higher education systems that occurred at the same time: as in the United States three decades earlier, enrolments increased rapidly and the student body became more diverse. Most European governments encouraged this expansion, but growing financial stringencies and the notion that higher education should be more closely geared to the labour market brought pressures for more rational management. This led to the introduction of comprehensive planning and control mechanisms.

The growing influence of governmental controls on higher education can be seen in the various innovations introduced in Europe in the 1970s and the

early 1980s. New structures were invented and -more or less successfully- implemented, including the comprehensive university in Sweden, the 'Gesamthochschule' in Germany and the new sub-systems in Britain (the polytechnics), France (the university institutes of technology) and Norway (the regional colleges). New laws were passed: the 'Hochschulrahmgesetz' in Germany (1976), the Higher Education Reform Act in Sweden (1977) and the 'Loi d'Orientation' in France (1984). New financial systems were introduced, leading on the one hand to tighter budgets and on the other forcing higher education institutions to seek other funding sources besides the state. And, last but not least, the administrative structures of the higher education systems expanded, resulting in various forms of 'meso-administration', such as the University Grants Committee and the National Advisory Body in Britain, the Standing Conference of *Länder* Ministers of Education and the West German Rector's Conference in Germany, the University Council in Norway, the Conference of University Presidents in France and the Regional Committees in Sweden.

By the beginning of the 1980s the grip of government on the European higher education systems had tightened. Higher education came to be seen as "knowledge generating engines sandwiched between the corporatism of the industrial state and the exigencies of business" (Neave, 1985, p. 120). To government, higher education became a crucial means of attaining economic goals and, because of financial austerity, these instruments had to be used efficiently and professionally. Normally this meant that the systems had to be centrally planned and extensively controlled.

Recent political discussions on the societal role of higher education have focused on its function in generating and stabilising economic and industrial innovations. Its main objective is to be creative and excellent, both in producing the necessary scientific and technological breakthroughs and in educating professional able to handle and organise innovations that will follow upon these breakthroughs.

Generally speaking, two broad strategies can be identified in the ways European governments are seeking to attain the goals of creativity and excellence in higher education (van Vught, 1988). The first reflects the attitude of governments towards higher education traditional in the 1970s. It is a *strategy of governmental planning and control*. Government tries to steer higher education by stringent regulations and extensive control mechanisms,

acting as if it were omnipotent and convinced that it can guide the system according to its own objectives. This approach is reflected in the budgetary cuts and resource reallocations that have taken place in several European countries.

The second strategy marks an important change from the traditional governmental attitude towards higher education. As was indicated before, in several European countries, the state is seeking to 'de-regulate' its detailed control of higher education, and discussions have started about new ways of steering the system. An important aspect is the relocation of power within the system: the autonomy of higher education institutions should be increased and government should act only by 'remote-control'. This new strategy has been called *the strategy of self-regulation*. It is based on the cybernetic approach to decision-making and (like was suggested for decision-making processes in higher education organisations) it emphasises the self-regulatory capacities of higher education institutions within a regulatory framework provided by government (van Vught, 1993).

Both strategies set great store by the innovative capacities of higher education. The strategy of governmental planning and control assumes that these capacities can be triggered by detailed regulations and comprehensive control mechanisms. Thus, government sees its task as steering the institutions towards specific innovations, using powerful instruments. Government sets the innovation priorities. Higher education is expected to adopt and implement them. The strategy of self-regulation assumes that greater institutional autonomy will enable higher education institutions to adjust to, or even anticipate, changing societal needs. The institutions are supposed to be able to initiate innovations themselves, while government merely facilitates these innovations.

Both strategies are thought to be effective in making higher education systems more innovative. Both aim for the same result. The important question of course is to find out which of the two is more successful, especially from the point of view of the growing attention for the extrinsic qualities of higher education institutions. In order to find an answer to this question, let us look into the literature on innovation.

4.6 The concept of innovation

In the very elaborate literature on 'innovation' this concept appears to be used in two different settings: as product and as process. Innovation as product means focusing on a specific object (a programme, a course, etc.) which may or may not be adopted by individuals or organisations. Usually the innovation is seen as a result of a process of creation or problem-solving, although the process is not the main focus of attention. When innovation is conceptualised as a process, what matters are the decisions of, and interactions between, the various actors who can be identified in the arena where a new idea or approach is developed, discussed and (possibly) implemented. The object of analysis is not so much the final product of a process of innovation, but the process itself. The present view in the literature is that a thorough analysis of innovation should consider both the product and the process.

The literature on innovation is growing rapidly. Research into organisations and organisational behaviour has sought to identify important variables related to the likelihood of organisations taking up innovations. Variables such as 'degree of decentralisation', 'degree of formalisation', 'degree of specialisation' and 'complexity' are frequently mentioned (Hage & Aiken, 1967). In the field of social psychology, several variables are suggested as influencing the development of an innovation process, including the level of motivation of the innovator, the degree of compatibility with existing values and practices, and the level of organisational support (Davis et al., 1982).

The concept of innovation has also been discussed in the literature on higher education. Several rather creative and elegant analyses have been performed which provide some interesting insights into innovation processes and outcomes in higher education systems (Levine, 1980; Cerych & Sabatier, 1986). Dill & Friedman (1979) have identified four major theoretical frameworks which will be discussed below.

The *complex organisation framework* is the one most closely related to the conceptualisation of innovation as product. The emphasis of this model rests on the analysis of correlations between the 'innovativeness' of an organisation and other organisational variables. Innovativeness is interpreted here as the rate at which new products (programmes, procedures, etc.) are adopted by an organisation, and this 'rate of product addition' is expected to be explained by variables characterising the specific organisation under study.

Hage & Aiken (1970) identified seven variables significantly related to organisational innovativeness: complexity, centralisation, formalisation, stratification (all 'structural' variables); production rate, efficiency and job satisfaction (all 'functional' variables). Only complexity and job satisfaction were found to be positively related to innovativeness; all other variables were negatively related. Zaltman et al. (1973) argued that the influence of the variables differs depending on the stage within an innovation process. They claim that complexity is positively related to the initiation phase and negatively related to the implementation phase of an innovation process.

The *conflict framework* focuses on the imbalances in organisations or social systems (especially the power inequalities), which lead to the formation of power blocs or interest groups. Changes in organisations or systems are interpreted as the results of the conflicts between these groups. In his political model of change in organisations, Baldrige (1971) emphasised the articulation of conflicting interests, leading to the formulation and implementation of policies. In this perspective, innovation processes can be conceptualised as converting the pressures of various interest groups into the formulation, acceptance and implementation of a policy. Lindquist (1974) argued that innovation processes can be analysed as a series of interest-driven considerations of a proposed change (by an initiator) by all the bodies involved in the governance of an organisation.

The *diffusion framework* is probably the most widely used model concerning innovations in higher education organisations. It concentrates upon the course of the adoption process (or non-adoption process) by the 'adopter units' in a social system or organisation; this is related to specific characteristics of both the units and innovation itself, which explain the (non)adoption. Important variables identified in the literature include the perceived relative advantage of the innovation, its level of complexity, compatibility with current practice and how easy it is to carry out a smallscale trial of the innovation (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

Crucial for the *planned change framework* is the emphasis on intervention and implementation. The basic goal is to manipulate conditions and processes to bring about desired changes. The most often cited theoretical guidelines are those of Lewin (1957), who has suggested that an organisation should first break loose of existing barriers to change ('unfreeze') before it can change ('move') and construct the support structures to benefit from the

change ('refreeze'). Research results in this framework are rather limited. Most planned change literature is prescriptive, indicating process-phases and instruments which are supposed to lead to the desired results. Research publications are mainly historical and/or autobiographical reports of intervention processes, and moreover show a certain preoccupation with psychological and emotional aspects. An exception is the finding by Rogers & Shoemaker (1971) that the success of change agents is positively correlated with the degree of value similarity between change agent and client.

Reviewing the four frameworks just presented, Dill & Friedman (1979) concluded that the theoretical and methodological problems related to the study of innovation processes are still quite large. The theoretical frameworks appear to be both too complex and too poorly specified to enable researchers to undertake clear analyses. Measuring the many variables mentioned in the frameworks and paying attention to their validity and reliability is an enormous task. Dill & Friedman (1979, p. 433) suggested developing less comprehensive theories involving only 'a subset of the panoply of variables' presented in the four theoretical frameworks. Such smaller theories could then be tested on a practical scale.

4.7 Government-initiated innovations in higher education institutions

van Vught (1993) has presented an overview of the insights about the relationship between government strategies to encourage innovation on the one hand, and innovation processes in higher education organisations on the other. The following observations are largely based on this overview.

In their overview of the principal organisational variables which appeared to influence success or failure of innovation processes in organisations, Hage & Aiken (1970) offered seven factors related to the rate of change in an organisation. These factors are:

- (i) the greater the formalisation (i.e. the greater the degree of codification of jobs, the greater the number of rules specifying what is to be done, and the more strictly these rules are enforced), the lower the rate of organisational change;

- (ii) the higher the centralisation (i.e. the smaller the proportion of jobs and occupations that participate in decision-making and the fewer the decision-making areas in which they are involved), the lower the rate of organisational change;
- (iii) the greater the stratification (i.e. the greater the disparity in rewards such as salaries and prestige between the top and bottom ranks of an organisation), the lower the rate of organisational change;
- (iv) the greater the complexity (i.e. the greater the number of occupations/specialities of an organisation and the greater the degree of professionalism of each), the greater the rate of organisational change;
- (v) the higher the volume of production (i.e. emphasis on quantity versus quality in organisational outputs), the lower the rate of organisational change;
- (vi) the greater the emphasis on efficiency (i.e. concern with cost or resource reduction), the lower the rate of organisational change;
- (vii) the higher the job satisfaction, the greater the rate of organisational change (Hage & Aiken, 1970, ch. 2).

Hage & Aiken's factors are discussed by Levine (1980) in the context of innovations in higher education. He suggests that higher education organisations are low in formalisation, low in centralisation, low in stratification, high in complexity, high in the emphasis on quality of outputs, low on efficiency and high on job satisfaction; he concludes that "institutions of higher education might be classified as low in innovation resistance relative to organisations in general" (Levine, 1980, p. 173).

The fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions seem to lead to the same conclusion. The great autonomy of the professionals within these organisations, organisational fragmentation, diffusion of decision-making power and limited administrative authority all indicate that higher education organisations are *not* very formalised, centralised, stratified and directed towards efficiency. They are very complex and by their specific nature offer the possibilities for a strong emphasis on quality of production and high level of job satisfaction.

However, many authors have argued that higher education institutions by nature are conservative and innovations are not likely to occur (Kerr, 1982). According to Kerr, a distinction should be made between an internal and an external perspective. “Looked at from within, universities have changed enormously in the emphases on their several functions and in their guiding spirits, but looked at from without and comparatively, they are among the least changed of institutions” (Kerr, 1982, p. 152).

Bok (1986) underlines Levine’s conclusion that, because of their fundamental characteristics, higher education institutions in principle are low in innovation resistance. He also points out that these same factors make it difficult to keep innovations alive. “Universities are large, decentralised, informal organisations with little hierarchical authority over teaching and research. These characteristics favour innovation by making it easy for any of a large number of faculty members to experiment in search of better ways of educating students. Unfortunately, the very factors that aid experimentation make it harder for successful initiatives to spread throughout the institution or from one institution to another” (Bok, 1986, p. 176). Innovations are created easily within higher education organisations and they may even spread among their bottom levels. But diffusion of innovation takes place only by virtue of the professional belief that certain innovations are worthwhile. Faculty members will only adopt innovations when they judge them to be worthwhile for their own activities. As Bok observes, “... the most promising innovations can languish unless some effective force causes them to be emulated widely” (ibid.). And the most effective force is probably the conviction of professional colleagues that an innovation is an effective solution to a common problem. This leads to an important conclusion: innovations in higher education institutions may arise easily and often, but their diffusion will be difficult and will mainly take place through communication between colleagues.

Clark points out another dimension of the processes of change within higher education. Innovations in higher education, he contends, are mainly incremental adjustments, building up to larger flows of change. Major, sudden and comprehensive changes are rare, and because of the fragmentation of tasks and the diffusion of power, such changes are extremely difficult to effect.

The ideology of the academic profession incorporates a basic resistance to comprehensive changes, especially when launched ‘from above’.

Organisational fragmentation and diffusion of decision-making power mean that a relatively large number of people and groups with a wide variety of values and opinions discuss the implementation of comprehensive reform. The result will often be that the reform breaks up in debates and political fights. Becher & Kogan (1980) argue that, because of the fundamental characteristics of higher education systems, innovation processes are localised and specific. "We are not dealing with a hierarchical system, where change can be decreed from above, but rather with a negotiative one, in which individuals, basic units and institutions each regard themselves as having the right to decide what is best for them. It follows that any innovative proposal has to be finally sanctioned by those who are in a position to put it into effect" (Becher & Kogan, 1980, p. 121).

This argument leads to the conclusion that government-initiated reforms in higher education systems, generally speaking, are not likely to succeed. Referring to Cerych & Sabatier (1986), Kerr concludes that "intentional changes" have sometimes be partially successful, but most often have been a failure. Curricular reforms and changes of governance in particular cannot be called a success (Kerr, 1987, p. 185). According to Bok, external pressures are only successful when they link up with initiatives or opinions inside a higher education institution (Bok, 1986, p. 183).

Some others have taken up this so called "policy failure" theme. Commenting on the Swedish policy which led to the reforms of 1975 to 1977, Lane (1985) argues that policy-driven changes in higher education system are possible. But to be successful, reform policies should take account of the basic characteristics of higher education institutions. "Indeed informational transformation of higher education work and higher education institutions is feasible, as long as basic features of the differentiation of work and the structure of authority inherent in the conduct of higher education activities are not threatened. Whereas public policy may effect institution-building and redefinition, it cannot do away with the bottom-dominated nature of the organisation of higher education life" (Lane, 1984, p. 107).

Premfors (1984) disputes Lane's "optimism". He concludes that "Swedish higher education policy is a mixed bag of success and failure when judged in terms of the initial intentions of central policy-makers....To an important extend....these outcomes have been predicated on basic features of higher education organisation in Sweden" (1984, pp. 47-48).

Similar conclusions are drawn by Cerych & Sabatier (1986), who studied a number of policy-driven reforms in higher education systems in Europe. They examined the level of success and failure of nine comprehensive reforms which were all initiated and developed by government and implemented in a higher education system through the interaction between governments and higher education institutions. Their conclusion is that both successes and failures can be identified and that government-initiated innovations can only be successful when certain conditions are met. These conditions relate to the specific characteristics of higher education institutions. Innovations can only be brought about by government strategies when these strategies attend to the basic values and mechanisms of academic life.

4.8 Conclusion

The general conclusion which can be drawn from the literature on innovation appears to be that the fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions imply that strongly restrictive governmental strategies are not suited to innovating in higher education. The strategy of planning and control appears to be too much at odds with the fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions to bring these institutions to creating major and lasting innovations. Higher education institutions simply do not respond to changes that are forced upon them from the top down. The strategy of self-regulation appears to offer a better perspective for stimulating innovations in higher education institutions. This strategy takes account of the fundamental characteristics of higher education institutions. It tries to stimulate these institutions to use their own autonomy to respond to new challenges and opportunities and it only 'steers from a distance' by means of remote control mechanisms.

If governments want to stimulate higher education institutions to increase their attention for extrinsic qualities, the strategy of self-regulation appears to be the better choice. If governments intend to persuade higher education institutions to better respond to the needs of society and to show their accountability to their various constituencies, the strategy of self-regulation will be more effective than the strategy of planning and control.

An increased awareness for their extrinsic qualities implies important changes in the attitudes and behaviour of many academics working in higher education institutions. It involves opening up the 'secret garden' of academic

life. It implies the willingness to respond to external expectations while at the same time keeping the intrinsic qualities of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge in mind.

Such changes cannot be forced upon academics and their organisations. They can only come about if they are based in the internal initiatives and opinions within the higher education institutions. Only if these innovations are judged to be relevant and worthwhile at the bottom level of the institutions, will they spread throughout these institutions and the whole higher education system. This is what the strategy of self-regulation should try to do. It should try to stimulate the basic units within higher education institutions to further develop the extrinsic qualities of higher education. It should try to offer an overall policy-framework that will trigger a growing awareness for external needs and expectations.

The newly developing evaluation and quality assurance system in Swedish higher education appears to be based on this point of view. Especially the quality audits organised by the *Högskoleverket* appear to be in line with the governmental strategy of self-regulation. The quality audits are focussed on reviewing the quality developments programmes (and their implementation) of the higher education institutions. Quality audits are monitoring mechanisms at a meta-level. Their objective is not to assess the quality of the educational programmes of the institutions, but rather to find out how the institutions are organising their quality improvement programmes. In this sense quality audits are instruments of remote control, that fit the strategy of self-regulation.

In addition to the quality audits the *Högskoleverket* is responsible for two other types of evaluations. One is the national evaluation of the quality levels within disciplines. The intention of this type of evaluation is to undertake system wide studies that will be used to provide the higher education institutions with information and reference points regarding their own quality development efforts. The other type of evaluation concerns the advice the *Högskoleverket* presents to government regarding the rights of institutions to confer higher education degrees. This process of licensing (which makes use of explicit criteria) can be seen as a threshold procedure to protect higher education (and society at large) from initiatives to offer academically insufficient degrees and diplomas.

The three categories of evaluation of the newly developing Swedish system appear to be improvement-oriented, rather than control-oriented. As such, this system is in line with the governmental strategy of self-regulation. If, in the years to come, the Swedish evaluation and quality assurance system will remain based on this strategy, it may be expected that the Swedish universities and colleges will themselves create the innovations that will allow them to increase their attention for their extrinsic qualities.

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