



Impact of Quality Processes

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A short history (of studies) on QA

- The current interest for impact studies makes sense in a historical perspective:
 - First, studies focused on design issues (how to set up QA-systems and procedures, the organisational solutions, etc)
 - The second phase implied an interest in methods (the various evaluation methods and their usefulness)
 - In the third phase we have seen an interest in "the human factor" (leadership, involvement, ownership)
 - Now, authorities and stakeholder are asking about the effectiveness of it all...

Some methodological clarifications

- "Impact" suggests a causal relationship between organisational initiatives and organisational effects
- Hence, impact studies must be related to definitions and understandings of quality
- But, if quality is a relative concept – studies of impact should mirror this understanding
- Hence, we should broaden our (often rather narrow) understanding of where to look for "impact"
- But, the consequence is that causal modelling may be even more difficult

What do we know about impact?

- If we apply a broader understanding of impact – we know quite a lot...
- Much knowledge about the underlying conditions:
 - the relationship between external QA and internal change
 - the need to balance accountability and improvement
 - the importance of leadership and leadership involvement
 - the difficulties but also the gains of involving students and staff

Introducing the four P's of impact:

- Power
- Professionalisation
- Public relations
- Permeability

Power

- Quality processes support institutional leadership – and institutional centralisation (and responsibility...)
- Quality processes triggers debates about the institutional identity (who are we, what should we do?)
- Quality processes has implied, at least in principle, a more legitimate role for students, but also for external stakeholders in higher education (broadening the definitions of quality)

Professionalisation

- Quality processes triggers formalisation (what some term bureaucracy (but also professionalisation/"organisational learning")
- Quality processes stimulates new forms of academic and administrative cooperation (leading sometimes to improved mutual understanding)
- Quality processes, through the establishment of systems and routines, eliminated much of the anxiety surrounding these processes (without altering much of the strategic behaviour related to such processes)

Public relations

- Quality processes help higher education institutions to articulate what they do (improving the external understanding of higher education)
- Quality processes have contributed to promote the importance of teaching and learning (balancing the continuing interest in research)
- Quality processes help defend the sector against alternative ways of trying to define quality (performance indicator systems, rankings, etc)

Permeability

- Quality processes have “demystified” higher education (producing more information about the sector than ever before)
- Quality processes, and the information produces by these processes, have led to more informed decision-making processes
- Quality processes contributes to integrate the various dimensions of higher education (coupling personnel data, resource allocation, etc.)

Some general tendencies

- "The fear" is gone
- Quality processes are increasingly integrated in other organisational routines and systems (making impact-studies even more difficult)
- Quality processes has in general been characterised by "adding on", not "elimination"
- To be involved in quality processes is seldom rewarded in career/economic terms

The paradoxes

- More information has not produced more meaning
- The more information available, the more information wanted
- More information has not produced less pressure concerning accountability

Some concluding thoughts

- Studies on impact important as “the quality movement” currently faces new forms of competition
 - from external rankings
 - from indicator systems
- Many quality assurance systems still “empty” – there is a need to link quality and strategy