Innovation, Learning and Quality Assurance - Mission Impossible?

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Introduction: The challenge

- *Many higher education systems are currently being held back from Bologna implementation – and thus from offering improved services to students and society - by national QA systems that are costly, offer no evidence of overall quality improvement, and stifle institutions' capacity to respond creatively to the demands of evolving European knowledge society* (Trends V: 2007: 59).

- How can we create QA-systems that stimulate creativity, personal engagement, local initiatives, and innovation?

- The relationship between teaching and learning and quality assurance still needs to be strenghtened – but how can we do it?

Another expectation QA is supposed to fix?

■ Quality Assurance - a very adaptable activity. In Europe, QA is associated with the following purposes: accountability, deregulation, control, enhancement, cultural change, information, market regulation, stimulate competetivenes, international comparisons, transparency, stimulate mobility of students, assign institutional status, etc.

■ And now also "creativity" and "innovation"…

■ What should be considered as "innovative quality assurance"?

- Measuring innovation/creativity or stimulating it?

- Is creativity and innovation the same?

QA - the antithesis of innovation?

- A key argument for the development of QA was "too much" creativity…We have created a system where organisation increasingly takes over the responsibility from the individual

- We have developed systems, routines, standards and guidelines to hinder very creative solutions to certain problems

- One of the central effects of QA is increased professionalisation

  - tacit knowledge, internalisation of norms and practise, expectations about how things should be done

QA – a special approach to innovation

- **Different modes of innovations, e.g.:**

  - radical vs incremental

  - process vs product

- **Hypothesis 1: the QA approach to innovation is currently characterized by:**

  - incremental change

  - product orientation

- **Hypothesis 2: too much consensus in the field of QA hinders creativity and innovation**

- At the European level, ENQA, ESG and EQAR "discipline" the field of QA, and are "disciplined" themselves

- Example: evaluation reports of QA-agencies:

  - More similar reports wrt structure (and they become more similar over time)

  - Increasing similarity in how evidence is collected and analysed (visit to the agency only, few independent data)

  - Composition of the committees (trend: representatives of E4)

  - The dominance of the ESG as a review procedure (alternatives not used)

Can consensus and incrementalism kill creativity? (2)

- At the national level, focusing on external quality assurance, there are also signs of increasing consensus

  - On programme accreditation/evaluation as the preferred methods

  - But very often combined with a number of other methods

  - Stakeholder representation is mandatory (HEIs, students, industry/labour market, professional associations)

Can consensus and incrementalism kill creativity? (3)

- ■ Is methodology becoming superior to purpose?

  - The dominance of the "General Method" (agent, self-assessment, peer review, report/publication)

- ■ Self-assessment important, but this element can also influence the agenda for the whole evaluation

- ■ The problems related to peer review:

  - Compartmentalisation

  - What are the effects of "extended peer review"?

  - Where is the disagreement?

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More creative external quality assurance? (1)

- Why not several peer review groups at the same time?

  - stimulate discussion, demonstrate the variety of perspectives on higher education

- Why not conduct the external review before the internal?

  - self-assessment is often a document containing the existing world-view - which is seldom challenged

- Why not organise evaluations of research and education in a joint procedure?

  - investigating more properly the conditions for "research-based education"…

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More creative institutional quality assurance? (2)

- **Why not leave the whole (or at least part of) the institutional QA-system to the students?**

  - Is the lack of student engagement a sign of students not properly involved?

- **Why not a cross-disciplinary peer review system?**

  - cf. the need for more cross- and interdisciplinarity in higher education…

- **Why not benchmark the institution with "outlayers" instead of "similar" institutions?**

  - Focusing more on paradigm shifts than performance improvements?

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"Organised innovation" is dependent on:

- **Knowledge**

  - Finding the experts, using data, and creating meaningful analysis

- **Decision-making ability**

  - Involvement of powerful actors

- **Trust**

  - Which is not something you "have", it is something you "get"

Pointers for linking innovation and quality assurance better:

- **At the national level**

  - Realistic expectations of what external quality assurance can do, and its limitations

- **At the Agency level**

  - Allowing for experimentation also in the standard operating procedures – not only as a side-show

- **At the institutional level**

  - Link quality assurance more to the institutional strategies (using it as a governance tool), and stop considering QA as an independent control system