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Is quality assurance leading to enhancement?

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Reformulating the question

Is quality assurance leading to enhancement?

- Is the real issue: 'have QA and QE led to improvement?'
- If so, improvement of what?
- What has been the impact on learning and teaching

Overview

- Part one: about 'enhancement'
- Part two: the relationship between 'quality assurance' and 'enhancement'
- Part three: learning from research and from experience
- Part four: stimulating change and enhancement
- Part five: how to move forward - big steps? small bites?
- Part six: problematic concepts: 'impact', 'improvement', and 'enhancement'
- Conclusions and implications

A note of caution...

'Enhancement is a messy business' (Newton, 2002)

'New realism' in quality-related thinking and practice

- Setting and realising enhancement goals is undertaken in a HE world which is messy and complex
- Recognition of ambiguity and unpredictability in academic life
- 'We work at the edge of chaos...things don't work as we intended' (Tosey, 2002)
- Complex social interactions and behaviours of individuals often lead to unanticipated consequences
- Gap between 'policy' and 'reality'
- Requires effective leadership and effective communication

Part one

About enhancement

The evolving concept of 'enhancement'

- Growing emphasis on the enhancement of quality
- QE becoming important politically
- National/ international quality bodies revising their QA processes
- Emergence of enhancement infrastructures at university and faculty levels
- Is there a shift in the balance from QA to QE?
- Variability in levels of confidence of national systems?

Keywords

Quality assurance (QA)

- a deliberate process to check, evaluate, and make judgements about quality and standards
- may indicate directions for enhancement and improvement

Quality enhancement (QE)

- a deliberate process of change that leads to improvement (e.g. in the student learning experience)
- includes both strategic initiatives and small steps

Improvement

- improvement is the outcome of enhancement
- arises from enhancement activities and initiatives, and from mechanisms designed to support enhancement

Quality enhancement as a process

- if we enhance something we change it and see the results as an improvement
- the experience of changing something involves learning (organisational; personal etc)
- it is this tacit learning that we seek when we try to disseminate or transfer good or innovative practice

Quality enhancement viewed sequentially

- Evaluation of a current situation
- Creating conditions for change
- Implementing change
- Evaluating whether change has made something better
- Has it improved the student experience? or academic practice? or institutional processes and procedures?

Part two

The relationship between
'quality assurance' and 'enhancement'

The relationship between QA and QE

- Relationship not a simple one
- Unhelpful to represent QA practice only in an accountability domain
- QA is an important driver for QE
- QA policies and tools can be used developmentally
- QA practitioners work in a developmental way to advance thinking and practice
- Academic colleagues learn through this approach

The relationship between QA and QE (cont'd)

- EQA and IQA reviews engage staff in thinking about learning and teaching
- May not have done so had there been no QA
- Awareness-raising and QA experience is itself a significant (European-wide) form of enhancement
- Without this we cannot advance the practice and improvement of teaching and learning

How has QA been used?

The impact of QA

- National systems differ: review? audit? accreditation?
- Focus: institutional level? programme level?
- Different audiences, contexts and purposes
- Compliance or development? Accountability or enhancement?
- Impact may be a function of the method, purpose and context
- Regulation?...enhancement?...reputational risk?...comparative rankings?

How has QA been used?

Beneficial uses of QA

- Learning from others – through peer review processes
- Awareness of difference – through review and (quasi)benchmarking exercises
- Focus on teaching and research processes – assists functioning of HEIs
- Facilitates institutional change agendas
- Greater evidence-based decision-making...
- ...by policy makers, students, academics, employers, managers, and administrators

Part three

Learning from research and from experience

What does research and experience tell us: about the impact of EQA/EQM?

Wales experience of EQM (1993 – 1998)

- IQA system meets EQM and IQM accountability requirements
- Less likely to be associated with staff or student-related quality improvements
- Factors influencing academics' responses
- ...divergence of views between 'managers' and 'managed'
- ...divergence between external and internal views

(Newton, 1999)

What does research and experience tell us: about the impact of EQA/EQM?

Estonian experience: curriculum accreditation (1997-2009)

- Analysis of accreditation reports and interviews with curriculum managers
- Impact generally low, but stronger in relation to curriculum and study process
- Less influence on university management or quality assurance
- Problem of 'proving' the impact of EQA (Harvey and Newton, 2004)
- Lack of evidence for impact of EQA on organisational culture (Stensaker, 2003)

(Vilgats and Heidmets, 2011)

What does research and experience tell us: about the impact of EQA/EQM?

Finnish experience of audit (Haapakorpi, 2011)

- Document analysis; interviews with senior managers, administrators and faculties
- Direct and indirect impacts of the audit process
- Direct impact (intended and unintended): transparency; collegial learning about quality processes; enhanced status of work
- Indirect and emergent impact: quality issues discussed more routinely in areas not included in the focus of the quality audit

What do the outputs of the 'quality research' community tell us?

Fifteen Years of the Quality in Higher Education Journal: 1995-2010

- Consistent concern about relationship between QA and quality of teaching and learning
- strong interest in 'QE'
- insights into QA and QE in relation to:
 - ...student assessment
 - ...teaching quality and student learning
 - ...staff development, staff reward and welfare
 - ...the curriculum
 - ...student engagement and retention

What do the outputs of the 'quality research' community tell us?

QHE Journal: 1995-2010 (cont'd)

QA impact, policy reception, and improvement orientation

- Baldwin (1997): bureaucratisation; administrative burden; lack of trust; stifling of creativity...
- ...recurring themes over 20 years
- Improved quality of learning and teaching; or improved systems and better bureaucracy?

(Newton, 2002)

What do the outputs of the 'quality research' community tell us?

QHE Journal: 1995-2010 (cont'd)

Others showed cautious optimism about potential of QA for stimulating improvement...

- ...Askling (1997) indirect impact of EQM in Sweden
- ...Whalen (2004) assessed impact of national quality audit (1995/2002) and reported modest cultural change
- ...Newton (1997) reported that Welsh subject review encouraged team-based action planning, dissemination of good practice, and improvement of the student experience

Quality in Higher Education Journal: 1995-2010 (cont'd)

QA impact, policy reception, and improvement orientation (cont'd)

- Others stress complexity of 'impact'
- ...Stensaker (2003) queried whether quality improvement is actually the result of EQM; data are ambiguous; difficult to isolate side-effects of EQM
- ...Harvey and Newton (2004) argued that compliance and control are more frequent rationales for external monitoring than improvement

Fifteen Years of the Quality in Higher Education Journal

2010: lessons learned? what has quality assurance done for us?

- Internal processes are still developing
- Links between external processes, internal processes, and improvements in teaching and learning are tenuous and patchy
- Relatively few impact studies in 15 years; reflects general paucity of significant research into the impact of QA processes
- Could the quality of higher education have been enhanced more efficiently and effectively without elaborate quality assurance systems?

Part four

Stimulating change and enhancement

Improving outcomes from quality assurance and quality evaluation

'More enhancement, a little less regulation' (Brown, 2002)

- Much quality assurance and quality evaluation has been conservative and inhibiting
- Quality evaluation tends to be accountability-led, not enhancement-led
- Imbalance between regulation and development creates obstacles to improvement
- Apply a strict test: does quality evaluation (EQA or IQA) lead to quality enhancement and improvement...and what evidence is there to illustrate this?

Improving outcomes:

Evidence-based quality-related policy and practice

Proposition:

- Most quality evaluation systems do not generate a robust evidence base to illustrate what works in practice for quality enhancement, and why it works

Features of research-informed quality policy

- Use best evidence available from various sources
- Take a long term view of likely effect and impact of policy
- Constantly review policy to ensure it really deals with the problems it is designed to resolve
- Learn from experience of what works and what doesn't work through systematic evaluation
- Is the focus on improved processes, or improvement in learning and teaching?

Creating conditions for stimulating change and enhancement

Managing the enhancement enterprise at institutional level

- Identify your enhancement mechanisms
- QE is managed in systematised ways...
- ...but is also facilitated in informal and culturally dependent ways
- Develop a capacity for institutional research to evaluate quality enhancement policy and practice
- This is central to being able to change and improve what we do
- Avoid impressionistic judgements about enhanced or innovative practice

Part five

How to move forward: big steps? small bites?

How to move forward: big steps or small bites?

- *'Educational change is technically simple and socially complex'* (Fullan, 2001)
- There is no quick fix!

Big steps or small bites: an illustrative case

Aligning the national and institutional-level focus on enhancement

- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR): a sector-wide thematic approach to enhancement (QAA Scotland)
- Explicit focus on themes that impact directly on the student experience
- (...first year experience; assessment; employability; research-teaching linkages; curriculum development)
- Regular institutional update reports on initiatives and testimonies from practitioners

Big steps or small bites: illustrative case (cont'd)

Enhancement voices

- ELIR national seminar: 'Little things that make the difference' (2010)
- Pre-seminar: 'Describe one thing you do that you feel makes a difference to the students' learning experience, or development of their attributes, skills or qualities'
- Post-seminar record of discussions and contributions: 'What are the little things that you do that make the difference between a student being successful during their time in HE or not?'
- (Four areas considered: assessment and feedback; transition and induction; curriculum; support)
- Outcomes: enhancement-focused testimonies and cameos from practitioners

Part six

Problematic concepts

'impact', 'improvement', and 'enhancement'

Problematizing 'impact', 'improvement', and 'enhancement'

Example 1: curriculum change to maximise student success (Yorke, 2008)

- Need to argue the case with colleagues
- Explain the implications
- Gain sufficient support
- ...in practice as well as in theory
- Implies change(s) in pedagogic practice...and student behaviour
- Broadly, a change in academic culture
- Message? changing a curricular structure to enhance the student experience is not simply a technical matter

Problematizing 'impact', 'improvement', and 'enhancement' (cont'd)

Example 2: does student feedback make a difference to subsequent learning? (Powney and Hall, 1998)

- Obtaining student feedback is seen as essential in a QA system
- Little is known about the impact of student feedback on teaching, on the quality of students' learning, and on standards achieved
- Given the number of variables involved there are problems in demonstrating a causal relationship between student feedback and improved quality or standards

Does student feedback make a difference to subsequent learning? (Powney and Hall, 1998) cont'd

- At best, evidence may only illustrate an association between teaching, learning, and standards in HE
- ...cohorts of students do not share exactly the same characteristics
- ...entry requirements or standards may change, making comparisons difficult
- ...course content, teaching, staff, and assessment change (not only as a result of feedback)
- ...improvements seldom affect present students and are directed at future cohorts

Problematizing 'impact', 'improvement', and 'enhancement' (cont'd)

The results of enhancement-related actions can be difficult to evaluate

- We engage in activities that we anticipate will lead to improvement
- But...
- ...this may be difficult to quantify, particularly if changes are complex
- ...the results may not be apparent, for months or years
- ...improvement may not happen, or may happen in a way not anticipated
- ...improvement in one area may impact adversely on quality in another area

Supporting enhancement

conclusions and implications
(for national agencies, institutions, and the 'quality
research' community)

Implications for the 'quality research' community

- 'impact', 'improvement', and 'enhancement' are under-researched and under-theorised
- quality revolution marked by a lack of 'impact' research
- (particularly impact of QA processes on...academic practice; student experience; student learning)
- Required?...
- ...longitudinal, institutional case study research?
- ...'insider' research?
- ...comparative (QA systems) research?
- Involve students in the research process

Implications for national and international quality bodies

- Build QA approach around a culture which values and supports quality enhancement
- Appreciate the complexity of enhancement-led change
- Be sensitive to the difficulty of measuring the results of such change
- Acknowledge that sustainable change takes time to demonstrate impact
- Provide resources to support strategic and local change, and professional dialogue about enhancement of teaching and student learning
- Have the capacity to disseminate information to support HE communities in transferring and adopting practices that are known to be effective

Implications for institutions and academic departments

- Embed enhancement mechanisms in quality processes
- Undertake institutional research (or internal audit) to identify enhancement and improvement
- Promote and value reflection and evaluation related to teaching and support for student learning
- Use this to identify ways in which improvements can be achieved
- Use external and internal data to build an evidence base of 'what works'
- Review and evaluate your approach to enhancement

Thank you!