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We Can’t Go Home Again: Insights from a Quarter Century of Experiments in External Academic Quality Assurance

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ABSTRACT What have we learned from 25 years of experience with external academic quality assurance that can help design more effective framework conditions for assuring academic standards? The key elements appear to be the structure and means of evaluating national academic quality assurance agencies, the nature of academic quality information mandated by government, and the focus of external academic quality assurance reviews.

Keywords: academic standards; external academic quality assurance; framework conditions

Beginning in the 1980s, state policy-makers in the USA, quickly followed by national policy-makers in France and the UK, became concerned with academic quality and began experimenting with new policy instruments designed primarily to assure and improve the quality of teaching and student learning in the tertiary sector. This interest in academic quality spread rapidly to other nations and we now have over a quarter of a century of experience with new forms of external academic quality assurance. What have we learned from this experience to date? In addressing this question I will draw on my personal participation in academic quality assurance exercises in the US, Europe, and Asia, as well as from a collection of studies of the nature and impacts of innovative policy instruments designed to help assure and improve academic standards, which were carried out as part of the Public Policy on Academic Quality (PPAQ) Research Program that I have directed (Dill & Beerkens, 2010).

While the academic literature on the policy instruments that emerged in recent decades has often been highly critical of the need for or appropriateness of these new external quality assurance mechanisms, it should now be clear to all academic staff that the ineluctable forces of massification and globalisation have had a significant and continuing impact on the nature of teaching and student learning in the university sector. These forces were inescapable in my view, because the expansion of access to higher education, the increasingly

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rapid growth of academic knowledge, the global flow of students and academic staff, as well as the influence on teaching and student learning of innovations in information technology could not realistically have been resisted. As a consequence of these new forces the processes of academic quality assurance that traditionally were employed within universities to assure academic standards, including disciplinary norms, external examining and existing academic governance structures, have become less effective or outmoded. In the immortal words of the North Carolina writer Thomas Wolfe, we ‘can’t go home again’, so the only alternative available to us in this new environment is to collectively reform and strengthen as needed the internal processes within our universities by which academic standards can best be assured and improved. Universities have always had such processes but universities have also always operated within framework conditions designed by the state to help assure academic standards. The crucial question, then, is what clues can we divine from recent experiments in external quality assurance that will help policymakers design and implement framework conditions that more effectively provide incentives and support for the needed reforms within universities? The following appear to be the critical points.

A national agency for overseeing external quality assurance independent of both the universities and the government

Buffering any agency or group responsible for designing, monitoring or conducting external academic quality assurance from government interference or from ‘capture’ by the universities being regulated is a challenging task. Some critical elements appear to be shared financial support by both the government and the university sector, sufficient funding to permit the development of a professional staff and a governance structure that limits the ability of the elected government to intervene and instantly alter the mission and methods of the organisation.

A government policy requiring or supporting the provision of essential academic quality information

Valid information is essential for assuring academic quality but because first-degree students are by definition ‘immature consumers’ and because the misinformation provided by commercially produced league tables has distorted behaviour in the academic market, academic quality information is more apt to contribute to assuring academic standards if we place greater emphasis on its provision and use by academic staff than by students. A recent analysis by the OECD (Santiago et al., 2008) suggests the most useful information to mandate for both external and internal purposes would be indicators of student retention, student progression and graduate outcomes, by subject field, for all institutions of higher education.

A well-designed external evaluation process for institutions

Academic standards are best assured and improved by academic staff at the programme level. However, systematic external programme assessments or accreditations have proved too costly to be sustained over time. Furthermore, the apparent global trend toward increased university autonomy and self-accrediting status suggests that external quality assurance is best carried out via evaluations or academic audits that can help reform and strengthen the core processes that institutions themselves employ to assure and improve the standards of their academic programmes.
The focus of academic audits

While the quality assurance techniques used by different institutions vary, all universities, whether publicly supported, private or profit-making, whether traditional or distance-learning, have developed core processes for assuring their academic standards. These include processes for designing, approving, evaluating and improving academic programmes; for evaluating and improving teaching; for assuring the integrity of grading and marking standards; and for assuring the legitimacy of student assessments. The assurance and improvement of academic standards in all institutions in the future will likely depend upon the validity, reliability and rigour of these core processes and the extent to which they utilise evidence-based decision-making. This reality should guide the design and focus of national external quality assurance practices.

The evaluation of external academic quality assurance agencies and practices

The framework outlined above represents public regulation of academic quality through information provision and academic audits. It is in both the public’s and the universities’ interests that such regulation provide value for money and not waste vital resources needed for higher education. Therefore, the activities of external quality assurance agencies and their policies should themselves be regularly evaluated publicly by established and respected national evaluation or audit agencies, similar to the Government Accountability Office in the US, which have the capacity to assess the social costs and benefits of this regulatory activity.

As suggested, the ultimate goal of external quality assurance should be to help universities reform and strengthen their institutional processes over time for assuring academic standards. In this sense the search for means of better assuring academic standards is similar to the universities’ quest for knowledge: an ongoing, never-ending pursuit of more effective processes for improving the level of knowledge, skills and values achieved by students.

References