

Quality assurance and quality enhancement: two sides of the same coin?

James Williams, Birmingham City University

Quality assurance and quality enhancement are discussed at all levels of the higher education sector but the two are often discussed without reference to each other. At best, there appears to be a tension between them and at worst, the two are thought to be contradictory (Amaral, 2007). This raises two important questions for the institutional research community: 1) are these two concepts fundamentally separate? 2) What relevance might this have for institutional research?

In part, the problem lies (as often is the case) with definition. Both quality assurance and quality enhancement have a range of definitions that, like quality itself, are complex and vary according to time and context. Quality assurance tends to be understood as being about measurement of quality and ensuring that standards are met; quality enhancement tends to be understood as being broadly about improving what we do in the academy (QAA, n.d.).

However, these definitions must be understood in the wider context of the changing perceptions of quality and the purpose of the quality process. Harvey and Green's five definitions remain at the heart of discussions of quality in higher education. The definitions 'excellence' and 'perfection' have largely been discarded; current emphasis is laid on 'fitness for purpose' (by the EU among others) and 'value for money' (by the government). Both of these have a tendency towards the mechanistic or instrumental.

What of the fifth definition: 'quality as transformation'? This seems to appear far less often, yet it is the profoundest of the five notions. Harvey has often referred to this element of the quality process

and presents it as (potentially) a learning process for all involved, particularly for students and staff. This concern that higher education should fundamentally be about a learning process is reflected in Furedi's recent (2013) concern that HE sector is too concerned with 'what works' and seems to be too readily dismissed as a pipe dream.

In reality, where good practice has been developed, it has been based on paying attention to what the key stakeholders have said. For example, where institutional student feedback processes have been followed over a period of years, there is clear evidence to indicate that student satisfaction is closely interrelated with clear, tangible action (Williams and Kane, 2009). Where institutions have acted on the basis of what the students have said in their annual feedback surveys, student satisfaction can be seen to rise. A quality feedback action cycle, such as that outlined by Harvey (2003) appears to work in practice.

At the same time, where students and staff work together to act on issues raised by this dialogue, quality appears to increase. Students can be engaged at all levels from student academic boards at faculty level to working with staff to develop new and innovative teaching materials. This approach has, at least at one institution, resulted in an increase in NSS scores for optional questions relating to engagement, but, more significantly, it has enhanced the experience of those students and staff involved. Engaging students and staff in partnership therefore appears to be a key component in successfully enhancing the learning environment.

This all implies that a greater emphasis should be placed on quality enhancement. However, quality enhancement arguably depends on good quality assurance, which should include a process of collecting and analysing valid, up-to-date and relevant data about different aspects of the institution's life. As historians might say, understanding the present can only be achieved through knowledge of what has already been achieved. Without good quality assurance, therefore, quality enhancement cannot be achieved.

The implications of this for institutional researchers are clear. There is a need for meaningful institutional research that informs this transformational quality learning process. Meaningful institutional research, however, needs to engage with relevant stakeholders at all levels in a dialogue that results in clear practical results. Staff and students are part of that dialogue and need to be involved as partners in the institutional research process.

References

Amaral, A. (2007), 'Higher education and quality assessment: The many rationales for quality', in European Universities Association (Eds) (2007), *Embedding Quality Culture in Higher Education*. Brussels: European Universities Association.

Quality Assurance Agency (n.d.), Quality Assurance Agency Website. Online: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk>

Harvey, L. and Green, D (1993), 'Defining Quality', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 18(1), pp. 9-34.

Reisz, M. (2013), 'Furedi criticises "methodologically naïve" education research', *Times Higher Education*. (15 September 2013). Online: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/furedi-criticises-methodologically-naive-education-research/2007350.article> [Accessed 27 September 2013].

Williams, J. and Kane, D., (2009): *Assessment and Feedback: Institutional Experiences of Student Feedback, 1996 to 2007*. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63 (3), pp. 217 - 317

James Williams is Senior Researcher in the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences at Birmingham City University. His has a particular interest is in student feedback processes and their role in institutional quality enhancement and has published widely in this field. James is also Associate Editor of the international journal Quality in Higher Education.

Note: The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of the HEIR network or its members