

## *QUALITY ASSURANCE & ACCREDITATION IN UK HE (and beyond)*

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This short article is designed to be uncomfortable reading for all those employed in the ever-expanding ‘quality industry’ that surrounds the delivery of higher education (HE) in the UK and, more recently, in mainland Europe. It is written in the hope that they will ask themselves the question: ‘Am I a necessary evil?’; and will conclude that they are not, after all, necessary, thereby saving the taxpayer money that just might be redirected elsewhere in the HE budget and, if so, almost certainly to better effect.

The article proceeds by way of four propositions and is written in the context of how ironic it will be if European HE escapes the dead-hand of centralisation (‘The Tryanny of the Ministries’) only to find itself caught up in an alphabet soup of acronyms relating to a spiders-web of quality-policing (‘The Tryanny of Agencies’): preferable indeed is ‘The Tyranny of the Market’! Via the Bologna Process, now linked to the Lisbon Strategy, and via the growth of quality-quangos, European HE risks being harmonised, centralised and standardised into a dull mediocrity– even more so if Bologna Process ‘soft law’ gets taken up by Brussels Eurocrats and ends up as Euro ‘hard law’ and as yet another Directive.

The essential problem and flaw is that, from the perspective of the student, the existing quality-watchdogs simply do not bark in the night. They are fatally compromised by being unable to speak truth to power by way of Government or (to a lesser extent) HEIs, since one or the other (or both) finance them and the former will not appreciate being told that its under-funding of HE has led to dumbing-down while the latter will not welcome being told that the emphasis on the Kash & Kudos of research has short-changed teaching. Thus, Government, HEIs, and the quality-agencies are together a conspiracy against the student.

PROPOSITION 1: HE is an increasingly weak political constituency in the context of the need to fund schools, policing, transport infrastructure, and the health/care requirements of an aging population – *hence no more taxpayer money for HE (and probably less) means ‘cost-sharing’ via tuition fees that reflect the private rate of return to the student-consumer.* (See D. Palfreyman, The Economics of Higher Education: Affordability and Access; Costing, Pricing and Accountability (OxCHEPS, 2004), also on-line at the Papers Page of the OxCHEPS web-site as Item 14 and updated there by Supplementary Notes.)

PROPOSITION 2: Yet, paradoxically, as the public funding of HE declines and HE is deregulated/liberalised/commodified/marketised, the demand upon HE for political accountability increases – *hence a risk that a labour-intensive and costly vfm/audit managerialist culture replaces the former State trust in and collegiality within HE as a free public good.* (See M. Power, The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification (Oxford

University Press, 1999) and his reference to a Soviet-style pathology of ‘creative compliance’ where auditable performance becomes an end in itself.)

PROPOSITION 3: The role of the State with respect to HE should, contrary to Proposition 2, be severely reduced to –

- a) *providing consumer protection (achieved by a basic accreditation process and a robust legal context for student complaints);*
- b) *ensuring taxpayer vfm (achieved by ‘voucher funding’);*
- c) *supporting HE as an export industry;*
- d) *offering grants and loans to certain students to ensure social equity in accessing HE; and (perhaps)*
- e) *sustaining certain (limited?) areas of academic activity as ‘strategic’ to the economy if it is assumed that HE really does drive economic growth in any meaningful way (rather than the reverse: see E. Helpman, The Mystery of Economic Growth (Harvard University Press, 2004) and A. Wolf, Does Education Matter? – myths about education and economic growth (Penguin, 2002) for material challenging the glib assumption that more HE means a more dynamic economy) and if it is also clear that ‘the HE market’ will not adequately finance such activity, notably ‘blue-skies’ research and related IP exploitation/‘technology-transfer’ (indeed, the State might also concern itself with ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’, and hence subsidise the Dead Languages – and in the UK even Modern Languages!).*

PROPOSITION 4: Quality in the delivery and development of HE is best achieved by a judicious and economical blend of all the following five factors, no one of which alone is capable of doing the job –

- a) *The integrity of a robust academic profession that has renegotiated a social contract with the State where, in return for the latter’s increased trust, it will not become (again?) yet another profession conspiring against the laity. (See Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, 1776, Book V, Article 11, ‘Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth’: ‘The discipline of colleges and universities is in general contrived, not for the benefit of the students, but for the interest, or more properly speaking, for the ease of the masters...’.)*
- b) *The HEI’s academic management hierarchy (not a pseudo-profession of ‘teaching & learning’ alleged experts!). Admittedly the managerial control, even by fellow academics/faculty, of academe is not easy: see R.E. Martin, Cost Control, College Access, and Competition in Higher Education (Edward Elgar, 2005): ‘faculties are notorious for their hesitancy in monitoring each other’s rent-seeking behaviour and for their*

*tendency to treat departmental budgets as a wages fund to be allocated on the basis of the spoils system.'*

*c)The empowered student consumer (and his/her parents – 'Mum Power'!). (See the discussion in Chapter 14, 'The Student as Consumer?', in D.J. Farrington and D. Palfreyman, The Law of Higher Education (Oxford University Press, 2006); and note the article in The Daily Telegraph (19/4/06, p 21) by Professor Susan Bassnett, Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Warwick: 'I predict that with greater parental involvement, we may yet see the quality of higher education start to rise', see also a web-site on perceived failings in mass UK HE run by a student who settled for £30K from his University for alleged misrepresentation and breach of the contract to educate, [www.educationissues.net](http://www.educationissues.net).)*

*d)The (carefully filtered) influence of the future employers of students in terms of their 'graduateness' and 'fitness for purpose', including the requirements of the professions in terms of graduates and their 'fitness to practise'.*

*e) The (strictly minimal and precisely defined) role of the external policing of quality assurance/accreditation, being very careful to avoid the expensive and cumbersome, depressingly unprincipled UK experience. (See the critique by Greatrix, Dangerous Medicine: Problems with assuring quality and standards in UK higher education (University of Warwick Press, 2005); it is well worth quoting from at length as follows: 'Industrial approaches to quality and the use of the language of total quality management and other related models in HE, serve to undermine the fundamental purposes and role of universities. What all of the arguments for the adoption of industrial models have in common is that they attempt to impose an external, ill-fitting and inappropriate framework on HE. The development of quality assurance in HE is closely linked to industrial models and the 'consensus' about the linkage of quality in higher education to economic success. It involves superficial and naïve borrowing but also standardisation as an approach to assuring standards. The language and terminology of industrially-derived quality assurance is adopted by those who do not appear to understand that they can be no more than metaphors in an academic context...As Power [cited above] has observed, the increase in pointless information systems leads to inspection overload, deception is exacerbated and this results in a decline in organisational trust which only serves to increase anxiety and paranoia. Thus controls introduced to enhance trust may actually undermine trust and deter the achievement of the goals they are put in place to serve. These adverse effects though tend to be hidden by the programmatic imperative that audit must work. Moreover, the assumptions of distrust sustaining audit become self-fulfilling as auditees*

*adapt their behaviour in response to audit and hence may become less trustworthy. There is no evident material quality enhancement dividend arising from external quality assurance and where quality enhancement or improvement does occur it is likely that it will manifest itself as procedural improvement rather than enhancement of the delivery of teaching by academics or the learning experience of students. Recommendations in TQA and audit reports are overwhelmingly procedural and process-based and do not offer anything of substance to enhance quality other than in a punitive way (the implication being 'do this or next time you will suffer') which simply fosters a compliance culture, a culture reinforced by the prescriptive nature of the QAA framework... The QAA is undermining quality and standards in HE. Analysis of the components of the framework, the national qualifications framework, benchmark statements on standards, the code of practice and programme specifications shows the limited extent to which the QAA framework is likely to assure quality and standards in HE. This view is supported by the extremely narrow way in which the programmatic elements in terms of the minimum standards expected in evaluation practice.'*

Besides the five factors listed above, quality-control might also be achieved by the efficiency of journalists more than by expensive agencies – it was the persistence of Phil Baty at The Higher that, using the Freedom of Information Act, exposed the alleged scandal of De Montfort University adding up to 14% to the marks of some of its Pharmacy students in order to avoid too high a failure rate (The Higher, 21/4/06, p 7). The alleged failure of the QAA to have adequately challenged DMU has subsequently been raised by politicians (The Higher, 28/4/06), p 9). Similarly, expanding on 4d above, the professional associations again may be a much more effective and economical check on dumbing-down and under-resourcing: the British Psychological Society has threatened to withdraw accreditation of DMU's Psychology degree course because the staff-student ratio appears to have deteriorated above 1:20 (The Higher, 28/4/06, p9 and also Kenneth Minoque 'Opinion' at p 12: 'Bureaucratic accountability has replaced the professional ethos of earlier generations [as] universities have become the playthings of political caprice...'). The DMU Pharmacy debacle seemingly indicate that, in addition, there may still be a real quality-control role for external examiners (4a above), but, only if, as in this instance, they unite and speak out against 'management' (as, also, apparently and courageously, did a few of DMU's own academics – again 4a above and also The Higher, 5/5/06: see also D.W. Piper, Are Professors Professional? The Organisation of University Examinations (Jessica Kingsley, 1994) for research on 'the work of

external examiners' (Part 3), and a sad conclusion (from the early-1990s) that 'external examining is not, on the whole, being conducted in a truly professional manner... the external examiner system cannot go on as it is. It has either to be scrapped or revamped.'). It is, of course, bizarre that such 'management' might even have to include a HEI's own 'quality-control' hierarchy! Is 'quality-control' more a part of marketing and PR than a truly independent entity/watch-dog?

(OxCHEPS hopes in 2007 to launch a consumer-oriented web-site giving HE applicants/students, and their parents, information about the real provision of teaching at UK HEIs: staff-student ratios, contact hours, use of casual/adjunct academic staff, seminar sizes, quantity of written work and the scope for oral feedback and/discussion of such written work between an academic and the individual student, etc. In this, OxCHEPS is influenced by the emerging agreement that UK students will be paying more for less: for example, The Times (19/4/06, p 26) on the idea of 2-year undergraduate degrees (Bologna Process Cycle 1 compliant?!): (quoting a HE union) 'One of the problems is that students get taught for a very small part of the year – some students can be taught for less than half a year – so it would be worth trying to have a more concentrated year'; and Patrick Ainley in the Letters page of The Daily Telegraph (19/4/06, p 17): 'Sir, Even before higher education fees rise to the current maximum of £3,000 this autumn, it is well established that students are already paying more for less. As I wrote in the Journal of Further and Higher Education last year: "The mass of students get less and less for more debt and more effort. While slaving at McJobs, they pay more for courses reduced towards 'bite-sized chunks', moving from one module to another without established peer groups and sensing that no one cares about them in increasingly chaotic and overcrowded institutions with no time for negotiation of meaning with their teachers.'" ' Might the answer indeed be, as Bassnett suggests (cited above), the empowered student consumer, and his/her Mum?)

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