Quality matters

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A QAA briefing paper

Who killed what in the quality wars?

by Sir David Watson

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Foreword

Quality matters is a series of occasional papers that are either initiated within or commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), as well as selected papers offered by other authors. The series is intended to complement the range of current QAA publications, which include the many factual reports of audits and reviews carried out within the UK and overseas, and what has, through retrospective reflection, been learnt from them. More recently, we have started the *Outcomes from...* series of papers, which draw together material, on a thematic basis, from the most recent audit reports.

Like all QAA publications, the papers in the *Quality matters* series will be evidence-based, but they are intended to do more than simply report - they will also promote discussion and debate about topical and important issues concerned with the management of quality assurance and particularly with its inter-relationships with 'enhancement'. Whilst many papers will of course be concerned with, and it is hoped support, the evolving quality assurance/enhancement debates within the UK, the series will also seek to include international perspectives.

This first paper in the series is by Sir David Watson. Drawing upon a wealth of evidence and experience, it sets out the author's personal views on the changing contexts that have both influenced and accompanied the evolution of quality assurance in UK higher education, particularly during the last decade. It provides a new insight into why and how these changes occurred and also, importantly, sets out a series of stimulating topics and themes that are integral to any informed current discussion about the future development of quality management and the higher education it seeks to assure.

[1] The QSN brings together colleagues involved in the management of quality and academic standards arrangements from higher education across the UK. It provided the venue at which the original version of this paper was given. For further information contact its Convener, Professor Peter Bush (Peter.Bush@northampton.ac.uk).

I am told that the Quality Strategy Network (QSN) represents something of a fresh start in our thinking about quality assurance and enhancement in UK higher education. In that spirit, I have been encouraged to offer a historical perspective on its birth and its prospects. The Network has been conceived, of course, in an atmosphere of conflict: as the audit society and the accountability culture have collided (apparently) with academic freedom and institutional autonomy. For some people in key roles across the system, this controversy has structured the most important phases of their careers, as they have striven to deal with the political forces - inside and outside the sector - and to minimise their deleterious effects. (I shall subsequently call these *type A* witnesses: both willing and reluctant managers of the quality assurance enterprise.) Meanwhile, for most teachers in higher education, the controversy has darkened the background of their efforts to do their best for their students, their subjects and their institutions. (These will be identified as *type B* witnesses, notable for their sense of powerless victimhood.)

My thesis is that this may have been a Twenty Years War (that would take us back to the mid-1980s and the origins of many of the contributing tensions in the dramatic, largely under-funded, expansion that began then), but it has not been a Hundred Years War. One of the most distinctive features of the development of the UK system of higher education has been its willingness to take academic responsibility for its own enlargement. Let us think about some of the landmarks.

Historical framework of external quality assurance

- Validating and awarding universities
- Professional and statutory bodies
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)
- External examiners
- Post-Robbins 'academic advisory committees'
- Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) (1964-93)
- The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 1995
- Academic Audit Unit (1990-92)
- The Further and Higher Education (FHE) Act 1992 - audit and assessment
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) 1997
- The 'lighter touch' (2001)

The UK system is admired around the world for its commitment to systematic peer review. So it is deeply ironic that at home the 'quality wars' have threatened to tear the sector apart. If you take the long historical view, the 'collaborative' gene was there from the start, for example through London external degrees and the system of 'validating universities' (notably the Victoria University of Manchester). External members of university college committees played their part in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the two major phases of late twentieth century expansion. These were overseen, in turn, by 'academic advisory committees' for the post-Robbins foundations and by the CNAA for what was termed 'public sector higher education.' All this sat alongside 'academic' contributions to other 'quality assurance' agencies, including both the accrediting and 'recognition' role of professional and statutory bodies (PSBs), and the more direct 'inspection' role of the state (HMI, and latterly Ofsted). But perhaps the most potent symbol is that of the 'external examiner,' a figure of immense moral importance, significantly envied in other systems.

Following the Conservative legislation of 1988 and 1992, some of these functions were indeed bureaucratised, and the sector tried - late in the day - to take pre-emptive action against the encroachment of the state. But the paradox was that, as the world beat a path to the UK door to learn about how to do some of these things, a series of 'popular revolts' at home did their best to do away with them.

So who has made the most sense of what happened in the quality wars?

My star type A witness is Roger Brown, former Chief Executive of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) and author of *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience Since 1992* (RoutledgeFalmer: London 2004).

Roger Brown has written an angry but, nonetheless, valuable book. Despite its objective intentions, it is fundamentally a personal account (he calls it 'an insider's view') of his decade at the frontline of a decade of public wrestling over quality assurance systems. It begins with the Government's white paper of 1991 *Higher Education: A New Framework*, and ends with the sort of resolution achieved, if only through exhaustion, by the politically inspired compromise of March 2002. This abandoned universal assessment in favour of institutional audit by QAA. It is described by Brown as 'the Russell Group's putsch'. We, of course, know it more affectionately as 'the lighter touch': one of those things which, like 'the single conversation', sounds better than it is.

In style, Brown's book is eerily reminiscent of those ghost-written autobiographies of sportsmen and women. Lots of sentences begin with the phrase 'so much for…' and end with exclamation marks (like 'So much for the leadership of the sector!'). There is deep loyalty to the author's team: principally the staff of the HEQC, of which he was Chief Executive for its five-year life. (This meant that it lasted one year longer than the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) and Universities Funding Council (UFC), whose demise, as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, kick-started the contest which is his chief preoccupation.) Members of the HEQC team are uniformly described as 'shrewd', 'capable', and 'insightful' in contrast, not only to the 'other' team (principally the officers and members of the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE]), but also to the politicians and leaders of the sector. Then there is the bipolar approach to victory and defeat: the victory is always a triumph for the team; the defeat the product of, at best, *force majeure* and, at worst, cheating. There is a lot of insider hindsight (based upon 'my Whitehall days'), backed up by the personal record (easily the most regularly quoted and cited authority is the author himself). Above all, there is confidence in the rational superiority of the road not taken: the book begins and ends with the expression 'what a waste'.

At this point I have to declare an interest, as a player, for at least part of the time, on the opposing team: I chaired the Funding Council's Quality Assessment Committee (QAC) between 1992 and 1996. The competition - as it was crudely perceived - was between a funding council-led process, which 'assessed' the performance of teaching, by subject, and an agency-led approach (handed on by the traditional universities' Academic Audit Unit (AAU) to the HEQC), which 'audited' institutions' systems of quality assurance. Brown exaggerates, I believe, the extent to which the former was solely about 'accountability' (boo) and the latter 'enhancement' (hurrah), but he correctly identifies the tension between a system managed by the funders and one apparently managed by the sector's own body. He is right that both sides played fast and loose with the concept of self-regulation (as he says, the real argument was about 'where the line should be drawn and who should draw it'). He is also right (as is his former Chairman, John Stoddart, who contributes a foreword to the book), that this was really all about power and, in Stoddart's words, a 'redefinition of the balance of power between the government and the sector.'

In a well-argued first chapter, Brown locates the conflict convincingly within the context of the 'regulatory state' and 'audit society' established by Margaret Thatcher and maintained to the full by Tony Blair. He exposes the superficial thinking which led to the elevation of efficiency over effectiveness, the confusion of fitness of and for purpose, the politically charged distortions of 'public information', and the assumption that crude competition would ensure improved quality alongside 'value for money'. However, he errs by beginning his account of academic self-regulation so abruptly; his earliest references are to the Reynolds committee of 1983 in the 'university' sector and, cursorily, to the CNAA record since 1964 in the 'public' sector of higher education. There is no sympathy here with the long, and deep, history of the UK higher education system's record - with which I began this paper - of taking collective responsibility of quality and standards through expansion and academic 'enlargement' (by which I mean the legitimisation of new subjects, the authorisation of new providers, and above all the policing of the outer boundaries of what is called, often with slippery logic, 'diversity').

Instead, Brown hits the ground running, and makes the same mistake as many of those he

most aggressively criticises by assuming that a clean slate could and should have been created. This leads, in my view, to several interpretative flaws. He underplays the pre-emptive purposes of the HEQC's predecessor, the AAU, as it attempted to ward off an extension of a CNAA-type regime in response not only to the Reynolds report, but also the Lindop Committee of 1985. He misses the main point of the vice-chancellors' reaction, in a key meeting at the University of Keele in 1993, that, in insisting on replacing the QAC's sampling process by a system of universal visiting, they were, in effect, trying to overcome the process of assessment by breaking it. Instead, in the critical circular (HEFCE 33/94 of October 1994) - dismissed by Brown in a few lines - the Funding Council responded by delivering to the sector the system that it said it wanted: 79 per cent of institutions preferred universal visiting, and 83 per cent the proposal for a 'graded profile.' Incidentally, as a historian, I have a trained suspicion of the counter-factual, but I do sometimes speculate about what might have happened if the original QAC's process had been allowed to run its course (we would have just completed its third cycle). Finally, when the Joint Planning Group (JPG) of 1996 was charged by all of the parties to come up with a merged or 'single' system, Brown underplays the negative effect of Stoddart's attempted power-play in proposing the HEQC as the comprehensive solution ('leave it all to us'). Like that of the vice-chancellors (led by James Wright, then of Newcastle), this was another sort of 'all-in' bet at poker that failed.

Above all, he can find the motes in the eye of assessment (especially the real difficulties in finding securely comparable outcomes - as on the model of the RAE - or in moving beyond simple 'threshold' judgements of adequacy), while ignoring a similar set of motes (if not necessarily a full beam) associated with audit and other HEQC initiatives. An example of the latter presented here entirely uncritically is the Graduate Standards Programme (GSP): an HEQC initiative which began with a sound idea (and another heroic personal intervention he tells us, 'I still have the tablecloth,') about 'establishing the range of expectations that UK degrees now encompassed', but degenerated into a mind-blowingly complex and inoperable descriptive mass. In contrast, and for all of its flaws, teaching quality assessment (TQA) produced over an eight-year period a comprehensive, peer-reviewed, account of the state of teaching and learning in UK higher education (including medicine). It is probably the most compelling empirical evidence of the controlled reputational range of which the UK sector used to be proud.

This Domesday Book inheritance is significantly under-valued by Brown. For all of its flaws, I know of no other record in the world which could match it. Like many commentators, he fixates on issues like grade inflation and the tendency of smaller subject groups (like, for example, Anthropology) to over-value their members (sometimes with one exception: the department everybody hates). In the real world, both the RAE and Research Council peer assessments have learned to aim off for these. He also underestimates the extent to which the system did discriminate. For example, only ten English institutions came through the 'graded profile' exercise with no scores in the 'bottom' two categories (2 and 1): there was apparently something at least worthy of critical attention everywhere else. Meanwhile, the record told us some interesting things about the post-binary inheritance, with 'traditional' universities out-scoring the former public sector in areas which reflect a more generous infrastructural inheritance (like 'learning resources'), while the picture is reversed on 'quality management'. It will be easier to see the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and Higher Education Academy returning to the full set of HEFCE subject overviews (as did most of the Learning and Teaching Support Networks) than to the two editions of HEQC's *Learning from audit*.

This said, Brown's book will endure as a useful record of many of the key events and decisions during the most intense decade of the so-called quality wars. The experiences of 1992-2002 will in time be read against a larger and more generous historical perspective; such a perspective will also underline how inappropriate the maintenance of academic quality was for a Whitehall turf war.

My *type B* star is not a bureaucrat but a practising academic. Mary Evans has written another angry book in *Killing Thinking: Death of the Universities* (London and New York: Continuum 2004). The paradox is that the

academic's ire is hardly touched by scholarly detachment, or indeed basic scholarly standards. The story here is one of desperate dystopia. As several of her reviewers have concluded, Evans takes a number of half-truths and turns them into an unmitigated rant (Gillian Evans - herself no habitual friend of the establishment - refers to its tendency to 'condemn her own colleagues' as well as to its 'scattergun hatreds' [see 'Rumours of a death greatly exaggerated,' in *Higher Education Review*, 38:1, 2005, pp. 86-87]).

The premise is that the expansion and so-called democratisation of universities has 'done little for democracy'. Evans sets this conviction in a wider cultural critique that associates the democratisation of culture with an ironically greater power of elites, and of the male gender. Inside the academy, this is all tied up with audit and assessment, as on the one hand a form of Weberian iron-cage, and on the other a metaphor for the state take-over of universities. Nor is there much comfort in the past: the old regime was corrupt; the new regime is corrupt in a different way.

The book is full of hyperbole, and some astonishing bad taste. For example, colleagues taking part in peer review are characterised as Nazis:

'The secret brotherhood, and sisterhood, of assessors clearly exists, since without it the exercises of assessment (and possible punishment) could not exist. The horrible psychic reality of a TQA/QAA assessor is almost too awful to contemplate, but contemplate it we must if we are to have any hope of identifying this beast, for whom extinction is the least that can be hoped…. Since God no longer exists, we have invented assessment. It is thus possible to imagine that the judging of others has become a new form of the democratisation of God. Equally, the expression 'little Hitlers' might have a resonance for many academics; despite its anti-German connotations, most people are familiar with the idea that there are some people (be they in universities or any other community) who simply cannot resist the opportunity to evaluate, judge and even reach the paradise of the appraiser, the condemnation of the appraised' (pp. 30, 34-35).

So much for the 'collaborative gene'.

Meanwhile, in her keenness to excoriate the devil and all his works, reports like that of the Dearing Committee and Richard Lambert are demolished through crude misreading. On page 22, we are told that the Dearing Report 'explicitly stated that universities had four functions: they should be a significant force in the regional economy; support research and consultancy and attract inward investment; provide new employment and meet labour market needs; and foster entrepreneurship among students and staff'. This is, in fact, a quotation from Dearing's chapter on the regional economic role of universities. Dearing's actual 'four purposes of higher education' are as follows (and worth quoting in full): 'to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment; to increase knowledge and understanding for its own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society; to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels; and to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.' I don't know if the disinformation is wilful or simply lazy: it's certainly far from the kind of academic responsibility she claims to be defending.

At the same time, Evans tellingly repeats several times the suggestion that quality assurance is 'the revenge of the polytechnics', while, in so far as she offers any constructive philosophy, it is that 'the finest education is without aims and objectives'.

Why does any of this matter? I think it does because both the David Miliband-style technocracy of Roger Brown and the Melanie Phillips-style victimhood of Mary Evans are, in their own ways, deeply unsympathetic to the tradition of mutuality in UK higher education. In some ways they could be said to represent the two armies in the quality wars.

So what has been killed in the quality wars of the last two decades, and is there a prospect of organising a cease-fire before the Twenty Years War extends to thirty?

The first casualty has been significantly self-inflicted. Essentially the sector has colluded, by not taking responsibility, in giving responsibility away. Mary Evans is certainly right that we should not have allowed such important elements of our history and our values to become - as they have - the subject of short-term (and understandably uninformed) political adjudication. ('Then speak… of one whose hand/Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/Richer than all his tribe.' Othello, V.ii.337.)

The second casualty has been the truth. In his *The Institution of Intellectual Values: Realism and Idealism in Higher Education* (Imprint Academic: Exeter 2005), George Graham talks about the 'confusion of criticism and resistance', where his chief target is managers mistaking the former for the latter. In the case of Evans and others, the pathology is precisely reversed: we have resistance, and a crude kind of 'academic populism', that is anything but critical.

The third casualty is sectoral solidarity. We are approaching a period in which, as they chase various prizes ('world-class' status, even higher levels of research selectivity, a free market in student fees, constraints upon the competition, and the like), not only individual institutions, but also the gangs in which they organise themselves (the Rustlers, 94 and CMU), may hang separately.

A fourth casualty is the interests of our students. At one level, and at least initially, in the early days TQA did, indeed, ensure minimum standards, by driving out unacceptable practice: essays were returned, reading lists updated, tutorial absences monitored. If you want an example, look at the report of the very first TQA judgement of 'unsatisfactory' (on postgraduate English at Exeter): it describes a world which no longer exists (and a good thing too). TQA also did some things for enhancement, through subject overview reports and the like. However, the warriors have undoubtedly taken their eyes off the ball. The war itself distracted us from improving teaching as much as we could have done.

The fifth and final casualty represents perhaps the only area where politicians might sit up and listen. By shooting the messenger, we may have undermined the reputation of UK HE abroad.

Is a ceasefire, or even lasting peace, possible? I shall conclude with some of the things we have to do to make what Roger Brown calls 'effective self-regulation' possible. Some of them are about restoration of earlier values, although I am by no means complacently naïve about their effectiveness: every phase of quality assurance has had its weaknesses and its problems. Others are about genuinely new circumstances, which we must approach in a more generous spirit than Mary Evans; although she, too, is right in the implication that the solutions have to be cultural and not emptily procedural.

From either perspective, there is serious work to be done: to bring up to date the internationally respected system of external examination; to identify and control for the issues raised by innovations in teaching and learning, and especially in student assessment; to probe the deeper issues raised by the relationship between teaching and research; to take steps to ensure that collaborative provision between institutions - sometimes across wide distances, and making use of new media - lives up to its intentions on quality and standards; to calibrate external interventions so that they are led by secure assessment of risk and not just reputation; to think hard about acceptable standards of advertising and promotion; and so on.
To achieve these things will require imagination; it will require trust and mutual respect; and it will require going with the grain of an academic community operating at its best. Is it too late?

An earlier version of part of this paper was published as 'A Whitehall Turf War,' review of Roger Brown, *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience Since 1992,* in *Higher Education Review*, 37:2, 2004, pp. 69-73.

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