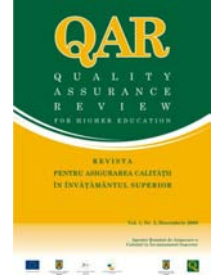


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Quality Cultures and the Assurance of Quality in Universities

Norman Sharp

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Quality Cultures and the Assurance of Quality in Universities

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I am very grateful for the invitation to meet with this distinguished group of academics today. I am delighted to be in Romania and to spend some time with you sharing some thoughts on what I think are some of the most important issues in higher education today – not only in Romania or Scotland, but, in my experience, round the world. I am particularly pleased to be able to be present today since this allows me to complete an undertaking I started in November 2008. At that time I was invited to address a distinguished international gathering at the University of Iasi. On three separate days we attempted to fly from Vienna to Iasi, and on each day we were turned back because of fog at Iasi, twice from the airport in Vienna and once, frustratingly, when hovering over the airport at Iasi. My address today is based on the paper I prepared for that conference. My thesis is essentially that, ultimately, the quality of the student experience in universities will most effectively be assured through a focus on quality enhancement. My thesis is very simple: I'm afraid that, like Iasi airport last November, there is a great deal of fog surrounding the issue of quality assurance – caused, I think, by too much attention being paid (at least in the first instance) to the wrong questions being addressed. Let me elaborate.

It strikes me that many of the problems associated with quality assurance in universities are global. The same issues appeared to resonate in discussion with colleagues at Council of Europe Forum for Higher Education at its meeting in Strasbourg in September 2006. Exactly the same issues permeated the air at the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies conference in Abu Dhabi in 2008. In these, and countless other conferences and seminars, we spend many hours in discussion and heated debate on the detailed minutiae of the 'how' and the 'who' questions of quality assurance - how we should conduct our quality assurance processes and who should be conducting them. We get involved in important and serious discussions about the legitimate role of public authorities and institutions. We spend countless hours debating how we can devise efficient and effective, valid and reliable systems for review at subject level and at institution-wide level. We get into heated discussion about the allocation of credit points and levels to our degrees and course units. I fear that there is a serious danger that some European debate on quality is increasingly getting caught up in trivia and losing sight of the serious core of the issue: how can we all strive to improve the experience that we offer to our students and underpin the standards of the qualifications to which they aspire?

Essentially, in my address I would like to change the focus from the 'how' and 'who' questions to discuss with you the 'why' question. Why are we all devoting scarce higher education resources to matters of quality? My presentation will start by outlining a simple thesis and then go on to illustrate the implications of this thesis by discussing four key outcomes or aspects of thinking differently about the nature of quality cultures. If I am allowed to highlight one area that I think is of paramount importance, it would be the issues surrounding my outcome three below and its links to outcome four. Fundamental to our discussions about quality cultures must be, in my view, the very nature of learning and teaching in higher education. If we lose sight of this, we inevitably descend to a focus on relative trivia.

In my exposition, I will be using some illustrative examples from the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework which has been approved as meeting all the requirements of the ENQA

European Standards and Guidelines and also the Guidelines of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies. In some regards the Scottish system has much in common with other European frameworks (in particular, Finland and Norway); in other respects it is significantly different. Having said all that, like all quality frameworks, I am very aware that it has its relative strengths and weaknesses. I am firmly of the view that there is no 'right' system: different approaches have particular strengths and weaknesses in particular geographical, political and temporal contexts.

My Simple Thesis

My thesis is indeed simple and will be outlined only very briefly. It is in three parts. Firstly I will argue that we can only understand and deliver effectively in respect of the 'how' and 'who' questions once we have understood, in our own particular social, economic and political contexts, the 'why'? question. Secondly, I will argue that a focus on educational excellence will, to a significant extent, meet the other imperatives behind the drive for quality assurance. Thirdly, I will argue that the impact of quality assurance processes will be maximised when the outcomes of the quality assurance systems themselves become inputs, and we move into the virtuous circle of quality enhancement.

1. Why?

Firstly then the importance of the why question. I participated recently in a discussion on quality assurance with colleagues in Chile. During these discussions Professor Henrik Montenegro posed a very interesting question for all of us involved in the business of quality assurance. He asked, 'when we look back in 10 years time, what will have changed as a result of our efforts? Will we look back and say that we have devised sophisticated processes, efficient review structures, clever audit methodologies, processes that ran increasingly smoothly? Or, will we be able say that we have contributed to a real impact on the quality of the student experience?' It seems to me that Professor Montenegro was getting to the heart of the why question. While there are clearly other issues involved, the heart of the matter must surely be the impact we have, directly and indirectly, on the quality of the student experience.

However, as Principals and Vice-Chancellors are very well aware, when you ask the why question there will be many varied answers from different perspectives. The specific focus of our answer will depend on our particular frame (or frames) of reference. There are three very commonly used frames of reference which are by no means mutually exclusive:

- market failure
- public accountability
- educational excellence

In the first of these, the rationale for intervention in relation to quality assurance is based on the failure of the market. From this perspective it is argued that, in a perfect market, the free choice of well informed and frequent consumers would drive out poor quality and support the growth of efficient and effective high quality institutions. The evidence is, of course, very clear: the higher education 'market' does not operate in this way. The market cannot be relied on to provide secure quality assurance, let alone quality enhancement arrangements. In the jargon of the economist, we have neither perfectly informed and frequent 'consumers' nor a structure of perfectly competitive 'producers'. The second line of argument is that all education, including higher education, is a public good which directly and indirectly involves significant sums of public money and these aspects bring with them a requirement for public accountability. It is argued that, because of vested interest, the institutions themselves operating freely cannot be relied on to meet the requirements of public accountability, and that we, therefore, require some form of external intervention in relation to the assurance of quality and standards. The third line of argument is based on the importance of quality assurance arrangements in supporting the delivery of educational excellence given the fundamental

importance of higher education in securing individual, community and economic wellbeing and prosperity. As I indicated a moment ago, these three perspectives are not mutually exclusive and indeed in many areas are closely inter-related. Some matters of public accountability in themselves will derive from aspects of market failure, and issues of public accountability will, in general, be closely related to matters of educational excellence.

2. The Pre-eminence of Educational Excellence

The second part of my thesis follows exactly from the above: to a significant extent, if we focus our attention appropriately on striving to achieve educational excellence, the requirements of public accountability and the problems posed by market failure will be largely addressed. An institution that seriously and effectively internalises a drive for educational excellence in the experience offered to its students will not be able to coast on a sea of inadequacy supported by its monopolistic position even if it was tempted so to do. Equally, the institution with effective quality enhancement strategies in place will be in a position to meet the requirements of public accountability by always striving in systematic ways to deliver educational excellence. I would argue in this context, that the public security that would be required should be the guarantee that there are effective quality management systems in place.

3. The Virtuous Circle of Quality Enhancement

The third and final part of my thesis is that, in general, the power of the outcomes of quality assurance is maximised when the outputs of the quality assurance systems themselves become inputs and we move into the virtuous circles of quality enhancement. That is, we manage quality, not for its own sake, but rather we explicitly manage quality in order to enhance the experience offered to the students and communities we seek to serve. It is important that our higher education institutions should reflect carefully on the evidence of past performance in order to gain insight into past performance, and audit trails of course committees, student surveys, graduation and employment rates are all helpful and important. However, this is the beginning of effective quality management, not the end point. The key question is now, ‘so what?’. Is this good, bad or indifferent? Against what national and international benchmarks are we comparing ourselves? How does this compare with emerging good practice in teaching and learning? Where does this indicate we need, either as an individual institution, or collectively as a higher education sector, to invest some development resource? What good practice can we pass from one department, faculty or school to another? In other words, the outcomes of our quality processes are providing the evidential base for prioritising improvement: the outcomes become a key input into our quality enhancement strategy. In subsequent rounds of the quality cycle, evidence is then available on the effectiveness or otherwise of change and so the process continues, and we are into the virtuous circle of quality enhancement. Essentially, this is true at the level of the individual department, faculty and institution, and, potentially, at the level of the sector. My argument, briefly, is that to be effective, a quality management system must be a double-sided coin: assurance and enhancement. Enhancement processes must be based on firm evidence of the base we are working from. Equally, experience tells us that assurance processes that are not linked to enhancement fall rapidly into neglect, game playing and/or sterile box ticking exercises.

Summary of My Thesis

In summary, my simple thesis is:

- in relation to quality management, the who? and how? questions can only be addressed meaningfully once we have answered the why? question;
- the why? question is most effectively answered from the perspective of ‘educational excellence’ which, to a significant extent, will address the challenges posed by public accountability and market failure;

- the impact of quality assurance processes will be maximised when the outcomes of the quality assurance systems themselves become inputs and we move into the virtuous circle of quality enhancement.

If colleagues are interested in pursuing these matters further, a more detailed analysis along similar lines is provided in the report published by the Scottish Executive, 'Learning to Improve: quality approaches to lifelong learning'.¹

Four Key Outcomes or Aspects

In the sections that follow I would like to apply my thesis to four strategic macro- level outcomes or aspects of thinking differently about generating and sustaining quality cultures.

Outcome 1: a shared vision of a high quality sector (within a country or network)

Let us start with a tautology. Before we can provide any effective management of quality in relation to a particular system or country, we need to know what our target is: what is the definition of a high quality higher education sector within our system or country? As a pre-requisite to having effective quality management arrangements in place, I would argue, for example, that all the 'Bologna countries' would need to be involved, in their own ways, in answering this question. It may well be that, over time, there will be more shared aspects of the definition of high quality over the Bologna countries, as to some extent is apparent in the work of ENQA outlined in the ENQA Standards and Guidelines.² What about within the Coimbra Group? Is there a shared understanding of what is meant by high quality between participating universities? I look forward to finding out in these two days of lively discussions. In general, how the question is answered and who answers the question will of course vary widely from country to country. In some highly market oriented systems where there is little public funding in higher education it may well be that this sector-wide definition of high quality is fairly loose. In other contexts it will be a much tighter definition of quality. It is worth noting in the margins that this is not directly a function of institutional autonomy or its lack; it is perfectly possible, as in Scotland, to have highly autonomous institutions that collectively agree on a sector-wide vision of 'high quality'. Any definition is likely to change and develop over time and to result from the interplay of the range of stakeholders. Notwithstanding the complexities involved, it seems to me that, if there is to be an effective framework of national policy in relation to quality assurance and enhancement, it is vital that there is clarity in sense of purpose i.e. what kind of higher education system are we seeking to provide. My own experience would suggest that the more participatory the exercise of defining high quality, the more powerful will be the outcome. Such a sector or system-wide definition of high quality will then set a general context within which the mission and policies of each individual institution will be derived. The more explicit and shared the sector-wide vision, the more powerful the outcome: the more implicit and widely contested, the shakier the foundations for any system of quality assurance. Before moving on to provide an illustration of this outcome, let me re-state my view that, used effectively, this outcome should support both institutional diversity and institutional autonomy.

Illustration 1 below provides an illustration of one attempt at deriving a country-wide vision of high quality in Scotland: a context in which the higher educational institutions are highly autonomous.

Illustration 1: A country-wide vision of high quality

In Scotland, over the period 1999-2001 there was a sector-wide discussion involving the twenty institutions, their students and various stakeholders on the meaning of a high quality sector. This rich and valuable debate resulted in the vision that a high quality sector was :

¹ Learning to improve: quality approaches to lifelong learning, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh 2005

² Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Helsinki 2005

- a sector which is flexible, accessible and responsive to the needs of learners, the economy and society
- a sector which encourages and stimulates learners to participate in higher education and to achieve their full potential
- a sector where learning and teaching promote the employability of students
- a sector where learning and teaching is highly regarded and appropriately resourced
- a sector where there is a culture of continuous enhancement of quality, which is informed by and contributes to international developments.

Outcome 2: a shared vision of high quality within an institution

For brevity I will not repeat much of what I have said above which is also highly relevant in the context of deriving an internal vision of high quality within an institution. Effective management of quality requires that an institution (and its staff) understands itself and that it has a clear picture of what, in its own terms, are the characteristics of a high quality institution. Such a definition, to be effective, should clearly be derived by the institution in relation to the needs of its particular students and the needs of other populations it serves. As with outcome 1 above, the more explicit and shared this vision, the more powerful the impact of the outcome: the more implicit and contested, the shakier will be the foundations on which to build any system of quality assurance.

Illustration 2 below provides an example of the mission of one university which clearly places significant emphasis on excellence in teaching and serving its community. (I have the permission of the University to identify it as the University of the West of Scotland – previously, the University of Paisley.) It is interesting to note in passing that the immediate neighbourhood of this particular institution includes areas of very significant social and economic deprivation.

Illustration 2: An institution-wide vision of high quality

The following example provides an interesting illustration of one institution's approach to defining and delivering high quality

- mission: to be a regional, innovative and inclusive University with strong national and international links; committed to excellence in teaching, knowledge transfer and research; and to serving the social, cultural and economic needs of the regional communities it serves.

Two main drivers for delivering the mission:

- planned strategic approaches to anticipate and respond to the needs of the students it recruits;
- structured process of continuous review and reflection on current practice and provision .

This is delivered through an integrated organisational structure involving:

- Quality Enhancement Unit
- Senate Committee – the Learning and Teaching Board – linked to other structures throughout the University
- the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) managing and overseeing the process

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This is further supported by:

- a structured and explicit approach to student engagement
- a strong research basis on their students, their learning styles and support needs

on-going systems evaluation to underpin further development and quality enhancement

Outcome 3: supporting students as effective, demanding lifelong learners

In many ways it seems to me that this is the most fundamental outcome of all: indeed, as argued above, the *raison d'être* of quality assurance systems. There are many different dimensions of 'high quality' which are not central to this particular presentation, and therefore I will not dwell on them. Much could be said, for example, about the importance of learning outcomes. These are indeed vital – vital for clarity of purpose: for relevance and validity of assessment instruments and pedagogical approaches, and for the recognition of prior learning. However, I would like to focus in this presentation on what is probably the most fundamental outcome of quality assurance: the function of quality assurance systems in supporting the learner, and consequently, the role of learners in these processes. In general, we are successful, to a greater or lesser extent across most European countries, in getting feedback from our students following their studies – at programme, course and institutional level. This is important, and there is a growing body of evidence now available to us on more and less effective approaches to getting and using this student feedback. This much is relatively uncontentious, well understood and documented. I would like, however, to look at a different aspect of student engagement – supporting the effective learning of students in higher education. To do this, I would like to spend just a very brief moment reflecting on the nature of learning in higher education. In this context, I am delighted to be giving this address in the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, described on its website as 'the first student-centred university in Romania'.

In this section of the presentation I will draw heavily on the work of John Biggs whom I think summarises very helpfully many of these issues in his excellent book, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*.³ Lets start with a very basic question: What do we mean by 'high quality teaching' in higher education? It seems to Biggs that one of the defining features of higher education is the engagement of students in the process by which knowledge is created. In other words, students, even first year students in university, should be exposed to the temporary nature of knowledge. Our understanding of the world and of our particular academic discipline has arrived at its current state through a process of knowledge creation. This process will continue over time, and the boundaries of knowledge will continue to get pushed beyond that which we currently understand. This is true for all disciplines: only the methodology of discovery varies. It seems to me that this simple premise lies at the heart of what is sometimes referred to as research-lead teaching. This is simply an approach to learning which introduces students to the notion of discovery: how that discovery comes about, and understanding the tools of discovery. This in turn lays the foundations for students as graduates who will become lifelong learners, and effective, over their lifetimes, in the workplace and in their communities. These ideas were expressed well in a statement from the Aristotle University following the General Assembly meeting of the Coimbra Group in Jena, Germany when they indicated: "A scientist who graduates from a university must not be restricted to a speedy acquisition of training

³ *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* 3rd Edition, John Biggs, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham England 2007

skills, but should possess the characteristics of a mature scientist who apart from knowledge in the area in which he has been trained must also possess the philosophical approach of his science and the educational perceptions of society”.

If these outcomes are to be achieved, then students must engage in what Biggs and other writers refer to as deep learning. Deep learning is contrasted with surface learning, the latter being at the other end of the spectrum from the process of knowledge creation. Biggs describes surface learning as engaging in such activities as: memorising; identifying things; naming things; paraphrasing; enumerating; and, describing. On the other hand, deep learning is characterised by activities such as: reflecting; applying to novel problems; hypothesising; relating new information to principles; arguing; and, comparing and contrasting a range of perspectives.

The question then arises, how is an institution and an individual academic going to encourage deep learning? How is a mature institution going to continually enhance the student learning experience? How are we going to approach the task of quality assurance of the teaching/learning process? The brief answer to this, according to Biggs, is that the institution must become an enhancing institution. By this he means that the institution requires to develop a reflective culture that builds-in systemic ways of reflecting, together with its students, on the effectiveness of learning experiences and how these experiences might be improved. By reflecting on what the evidence indicates, the institution, and its various sub-structures, will be led to develop further refinements, and so enter the ‘virtuous circle’ of quality enhancement referred to earlier.

The next part of the jigsaw is then to relate our analysis of learning to thinking about approaches to teaching. Biggs describes three different approaches which, he argues, might be thought of as successive steps taken by academics as they approach the task of teaching, progressing from novice to expert. The first stage he describes as focusing on the student. The caricature here is the academic preparing excellent material for lectures or tutorials. If the student fails to learn then the problem is seen to lie with the student – the students are ill-prepared, or lazy, or poorly motivated, or ‘not as bright as they used to be’ etc. In this approach, the teacher is the knowledgeable expert who expounds the information, and the students’ task is to absorb and report back accurately what they have ‘learned’ from the teacher. Teaching therefore becomes focused on the transmission of information, and it is entirely up to the students whether they receive or don’t receive this information. The role of the teacher is to transmit. The role of quality assurance, would be to quality assure the transmission.

The second approach Biggs caricatures as ‘the tool box’ approach. In this context staff will think carefully about the different ways in which teaching might be undertaken: choosing the right tool for the job. New lecturer induction courses will be designed to expose staff to the different tools available and how they might be deployed effectively. If there is a problem in relation to ineffective teaching, the solution is to provide better tools or more staff development to support more expert utilisation of the tools. The role of quality assurance in this context would be to assure the effectiveness and extent of the repertoire of tools deployed.

Biggs’ third stage is to conceive of learning in terms of an effective partnership between the teacher and the student in the creation of the student’s knowledge. It is of course not simply a relationship between the teacher and the student, but involves all of the educational resources that the institution represents, often channelled through the teacher or the individual academic. The focus here becomes a focus, not on teaching, but on learning and on what the student does in order to master learning. From this perspective, it is of course important that students are appropriately prepared, that they do have required pre-requisite knowledge and that they do have accessible means for accessing new knowledge. Equally, the teaching context remains important with the effective exercise of the teaching role and responsibilities fundamental to successful learning. But, giving ‘good’ lectures per se may be largely irrelevant. The key question for quality assurance is: is it supporting effective student learning? The task, according to Biggs, is to create a teaching context where deep learning can take place. If we are going to achieve this, then we need to achieve what the jargon terms as ‘constructive alignment’, ie where there is a clear alignment between the curriculum that we provide, the teaching/learning methods

that we use, the assessment procedures adopted, the climate and context within which individual academics interact with their students and, the institutional climate within which all of this occurs.

If we are to achieve this most challenging of outcomes, what are the implications for our quality assurance systems? The first, and, in my view, the most fundamental, is the importance of the enhancement focus which I will deal with in the final section of my presentation. The second lesson relates to the very fundamental question this raises about how we conceive of high quality pedagogical practice and the kind of evidence we should be collecting from students together with the kind of processes and criteria we should be putting in place for programme/course validations, monitoring and review and other quality assurance processes. However, the implication I would like to dwell on for a moment is the need to support the active role of students in all this. The simple model of quality assuring a transmitter/receiver relationship will no longer do. Students are ‘joint producers’ of their knowledge and must be appropriately engaged in the quality assurance of this process of knowledge creation. Therefore, a key part of the approach to achieving this most important of all outcomes, is the effective involvement of students in our quality systems. In this regard, in my view, there is much to be learned also from the approach in Finland. From this perspective, students should be represented on all key internal committees and engaged appropriately in internal and external quality assurance structures. Fundamentally, their engagement must not be token. Students must be prepared for, and supported, in these important roles. A key element of this would be supporting students in developing appropriate learning styles i.e. reflecting on their own learning.

Illustration 3 below provides an illustration of the ways in which students are now involved in the Quality Enhancement Framework throughout the higher education sector in Scotland.

Illustration 3: The involvement of students in quality management in the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework

Since 2003 students have played an increased role in quality management throughout Scottish Higher Education, at both institutional and sector levels. Indeed, the current chairman of the national Quality Working Group (QWG) is the President of the National Union of Students in Scotland. The QWG brings together the institutions, students, and the national bodies associated with quality to manage the overall quality framework in Scotland.

Other elements of student involvement include:

- student representation at all levels within institutions
- training and support for students in quality matters
- an independent body to support effective student involvement in quality matters (sparqs – see www.sparqs.ac.uk)
- student involvement in external quality processes including as full members of external review teams
- student involvement in national strategy and policy levels on quality matters

Outcome 4: a virtuous circle of quality enhancement

Can I start this section with an apology? I apologise for repeatedly using the term ‘enhancement’. I share many people’s hatred of jargon, and I would have to say, in particular, educational jargon. There is seldom anything more effective in turning off mainstream academics faster than reading papers or listening to presentations that are full of educational gobbledegook. However, the word enhancement is actually important in this context. It is not simply improvement. Enhancement implies a continuing process. It implies a process of making change, evaluating the outcomes of change, capturing the benefits of change and repeating the cycle of reflection and evidence gathering. Hence, I deliberately use the term ‘enhancement’.

My simple thesis contends that the main outcome of institutional quality assurance strategies should be to support enhancement of the experience available to students. Enhancement, I define in this context as ‘taking deliberate steps to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students’.⁴ In order to take these deliberate steps, an institution (and its constituent departments, faculties, schools etc) will ask itself a range of questions including ‘the enhancement trinity’:

- Where are we now? How effective is the current learning experience of our students?
- Where do we want to be in the future? What are the patterns and mechanisms of supporting learning which the institution wishes to develop in order to enhance the learning experience of its students? What appropriate benchmarks should we use in this context? What countries/universities/professions etc provide useful benchmarks for us to compare ourselves with?
- How are we going to get there? How are we as an institution going strategically to manage the process of enhancement that will allow us to move towards meeting our aspirations?

The first step in this process is therefore to have an accurate, evidence based, picture of the current position: without this, enhancement cannot begin. A key part of the function of internal quality assurance systems is to inform an institution about itself – the outcomes of course/ programme monitoring and review, student feedback, employer feedback etc. To collect this information and do nothing with it is largely a waste of valuable and scarce resources. The real value comes from the academic community – students and staff – asking the ‘so what?’ question: what does all this information tell us about ourselves in relation to our aspirations? In this context, institutional quality frameworks need to use a structure of benchmarks to make comparative sense of the information they have gathered in order to interpret the outcomes of their quality assurance processes. Some of these benchmarks might well be internal to the institution (e.g. institutional mission and other specific internal targets): others will be country-wide (participation rates of different social groups, graduate employment statistics etc). Some benchmarks will be shared throughout European countries; others will be shared with particular international groupings of universities. This process of benchmarking will enable an institution to evaluate its own position and decide on appropriate actions and quality objectives for the future.

The third question in the trilogy, ‘how are we going to get there?’, is equally vital. As Peter Williams has stated, ‘quality improvement does not happen by accident: it is the result of intelligent effort’.⁵ The final part of this complex jigsaw is to analyse the ‘intelligent effort’ of the institution: how does it manage effectively the process of quality enhancement? This is likely to involve the development of the internal culture of the institution and the alignment of its internal quality systems. For example, from this perspective, course/programme reviews should not simply be backward looking at what has been happening in the past. They require to be forward looking to address the question of how we can learn from the past – and experience elsewhere – to improve the future for our students. Outcomes from such processes should identify areas for development and improvement and these require to be managed institutionally to provide the means for delivering on this improvement. For example:

- staff support and development activities need to be aligned explicitly with the outcomes of institutional quality systems and targets;
- at an institutional and/or system level, whatever resources are available should be systematically channelled into addressing areas recognised to be difficult across the institution/and or across the country or system.

⁴ Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review (2nd Edition) : Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester, 2008

⁵ Quote in a conference address by Peter Williams, Chief Executive QAA, President ENQA

Illustration 4 below provides a final example of one attempt to achieve this outcome. It outlines the main headings of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland which, in this particular form, has been in operation since 2003. It is based on a number of key principles including:

- enhancement: the Framework is explicitly enhancement focussed: not at the cost of assurance, but building on the foundations of assurance;
- partnership: the institutions, students, funding council (with Government accountability), and Quality Assurance Agency have developed the framework in partnership and regularly review together with their effectiveness of its operation. The independence of each party remains respected and protected
- student centred: the Framework is focussed on enhancing the student learning experience – systems are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.
- evaluation: the Framework has been subject systematically to both internal and external evaluation from the outset and consequent fine-tuning of processes.

Illustration 4: The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework

The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework was introduced in 2003. It emerged following a full cycle of external subject level reviews and a complete cycle of institutional quality audits. It was the result of wide discussion and reflection on the outcomes of previous processes and evidence available on effective approaches to quality management. The key principles are outlined above. Central elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework include:

- subject level reviews conducted by the institutions themselves, but involving externals, student feedback and production of full reports which are available to the Quality Assurance Agency
- the involvement of students at all levels within higher education institutions on committees related to the quality of the student experience
- additional training and support for students in quality matters provided by an independent body (sparqs – www.sparqs@ac.uk)
- a programme of national enhancement themes on topics identified by the sector as involving particular challenges in improving the student experience. Within the themes a wide range of development, workshop and dissemination activities are undertaken drawing on international expertise and experience. Topics covered to date include: assessment; supporting student needs; employability; flexible learning; the first year experience – supporting autonomous learners; and research teaching links – developing graduate attributes. (see www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)
- a programme of external enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) which provides both public accountability for institutional management of quality and support for institutional management of quality enhancement. This is a peer review process with a student as a full member of each review team. This process is described fully in the published ELIR Handbook (2nd edition 2008 – copies available on request).

Conclusions

I am very conscious that I have touched very lightly on some very heavy topics. My purpose has been simply to place some of the fundamental aspects of quality processes and cultures in a significantly different context from that in which they are frequently placed. In order to think constructively about the role of different players in relation to quality and to plan and implement quality systems, it is vital, in my view, to first of all reflect on the question, why? – what is the purpose of all this? I have attempted to argue for the pre-eminence of the driving force of quality enhancement: to enhance the quality of the experience of the students our institutions serve. That is not to say that other ends are not important: they clearly are. However, the probability of achieving these other ends, I would argue, is greater to the extent we are successful in enhancing the experience of our students. In general, I have attempted to argue that the rewards of investing in quality systems will be the richer, the more these systems are forward looking and enhancement focused, rather than backward looking and focused on sterile box ticking exercises. I have tried to argue briefly that the achievement of such quality cultures will maximise the probability of supporting autonomous universities in their task of serving our countries through the generation of individuals who are effective lifelong learners; productive, dynamic and mobile participants in the economy; and, perhaps most importantly, engaged citizens of our individual countries and international communities.