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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

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- Since 1998 an active contributor to journals and conferences with articles and papers about quality assurance.
- Between 2000 and 2008 an active participant in the «Quality Audit Network» and its forerunner, the «Institutional Evaluation Network»
- Participation, often as chair, in more than ten evaluations of institutional quality assurance systems or national quality assurance agencies outside Norway.

(If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author.)

After the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.

Proposal

Title: *Quality audit: Fit for what purpose?*

Abstract (150 words max):

The paper discusses the current status of one of the traditional methods of external quality assurance in European higher education, the institutional quality audit. Taking its point of departure in a recent booklet about the method by the agency-based «Quality Audit Network»,

the paper asks whether todayôs audits, via their steering of institutional QA systems, relate sufficiently well to the educational quality of actual provision. Have institutional QA systems, and the auditing of these, become too large and unfocused, more concerned with performance by statistical indicators than with educational quality? Is the stress too much on óquality strategyô and óquality policyô at the institutional level, at the expense of didactic practice at the programme level? A slimmer and more focused approach, based primarily on information from the level of delivery and audited in a more investigative way, is indicated.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Quality audit: Fit for what purpose?

A discussion paper

History, development – and challenge

Institutional quality audit, under various names and in slightly differing variants, has been one of the standard methods of external quality assurance in European higher education for two or three decades now. For many years the method ócompetedô with programme accreditation and subject review for dominance, until arguments of burden, cost-effectiveness and institutional autonomy led many previous adherents of a programme-based approach to embrace institutional audit. Some countries have experienced swings between institution and programme approaches, while others practice a combination. Auditôs present position is probably also due to the fact that the ESG, a key element in the Bologna process, seems particularly adapted to a method that highlights the institutional level, with external quality assurance in a ómeta-monitoringô role.

Earlier this year the Quality Audit Network (QAN), an informal group of 12 European QA agencies that currently practice this method, published a booklet on the method and its status in Europe.[1] Their definition of audit in the higher education context, taken from an earlier ENQA study[2], is as follows: õan evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality mechanisms established by an institution itself to continuously monitor and improve the activities and services of either a subject, a programme, the whole institution or a theme.ò The QAN booklet contains the most recent and full presentation of the use of audit in Europe. Originally, audit is a *controlling* method, as practiced in financial audit. Just like financial audit, óeducational auditô checks the audited organisationôs internal control by scrutinising written documentation and conducting interviews with management and other core personnel and stakeholders. However, as an *indirect* method, it also places considerable *trust* in the institutionsôability and willingness to manage the quality of their operations on their own ï in accordance with given standards. Also, it is a *flexible* method in the sense that it allows for different techniques in the way that both institutions and the external agencies execute their roles.

In relating to the institutions, the audit method balances the ópposingô stances of control and trust, often based on assessments of risk that are made before and during the auditing

[1] Kastelliz, D. and Mitterauer, B. (eds.): *Quality Audit in the European Higher Education Area: a Comparison of Approaches,* (Vienna, 2014).

[2] Costes, N,; Crozier, F.; Cullen, P. et al.: *Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey* (Helsinki, 2008).

process. However, the method as practiced in higher education has shifted the balance noticeably in the direction of trust: it has become less hierarchical, less technical, less based on "first line" evidence and hence less controlling. Instead of the control – trust dichotomy the talk is now mostly about control versus *enhancement*[3], with much emphasis on the *dialogue* that the institution's representatives conduct with expert peers. In fact, "enhancement" is now the most favoured word, while "control" seems to have acquired mainly negative connotations[4].

Still, it can be argued that the reason why we have external quality assurance at all is to make sure that educational provision – as delivered and experienced – has satisfactory level and quality. This is in essence a control function. When educational audit uses less first line evidence and lifts its main focus from the institution's basic activities (e.g. educational programmes) to the institution's *QA system* and *quality management,* it does this on the assumption that a good and well-functioning institutional system will assure and enhance the quality of the institution's basic activities. The crucial question is then whether we can be convinced that this is actually the case. Do institutions really *safeguard* quality via their internal systems? Is the view from the auditor's position good enough to see and assess how the systems do this throughout the institutions' portfolios? And concerning the other side in the balance: how much real enhancement can we realistically suppose that external, indirect quality assurance can lead to in programme quality?

Characteristic features

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a fair and detailed presentation of audit practice in all its national contexts and variants, but many common characteristics concerning aims, scope, procedures and (supposed) effects can be distilled from the Audit Network's booklet and a scan of audit reports on some of the agencies' websites[5]. It turns out that the "audit formula" in these several countries is fairly similar.

The main object of an audit is to assess whether the institution's internal quality management meets a number of standards. Typically, standards are few (5 – 10) and very generic. Some agencies also include one or two specific themes for closer scrutiny or they may conduct a "drill down" into a specific programme or programme area. A system that meets the standards, in turn, is taken to provide assurance that the quality of basic activities will be satisfactory [6] and recognition/accreditation will be granted on this basis. In addition, the expert peers will share their observations and assessments with the institution in dialogues as well as in formal recommendations with the aim of promoting further improvementst. A more idealistic aim is usually to assess and promote a "quality culture" within the institution, for which however few explicit criteria exist.

[3] As if there is a logical contradiction between control and enhancement…

[4] Kastelliz/Mitterauer (2014): "Audits claim to support quality enhancement in higher education institutions. (……they) demonstrate the capacity of an (existing) institution to assure (and develop) its own quality." (p. 15). And: "Due to occasional confusion with financial auditing and *investigative approaches* (my italics), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (QAA) decided to replace the term *'audit' ….*" (p. 16). The Scottish QAA puts special emphasis on the enhancement element, which is reflected in their name for the method: 'enhancement-led institutional review' (ELIR).

[5] It turned out to be difficult to gain a wide view of report literature from the websites, as some agencies do not publish reports very visibly, and few present reports in English.

[6] "The institutions need to prove (sic!) that the implementation of their quality assurance system guarantees the quality of their basic duties." (op. cit. p. 19)

The scope of the audits always includes the quality assurance of educational activity, which is what we are concerned with here. In some countries research and interaction with society (ñthe third missionò) are also included. In the evaluations one tries to view the issue of quality from different perspectives or points of interest, which means that the views of managers, students, teaching and administrative staff as well as alumni and employers are brought in.
Most agencies follow procedures that closely reflect the guidelines of the ESG: collection of *relevant data* on staff, students and performance, a *preparatory phase* of information exchange and clarifications, a *self-report* by the institution, a *panel of experts* who study the self-report and other material, conduct a *site visit* and submit an *evaluation report*, which is published. Most agencies also have *follow-up* procedures, where there is a dialogue between the agency and the institution(s) concerning the planning and implementation of suggested points of improvement.

What impact do audits have?

The crucial question concerning any method is whether ï or how ï it works: is it effective? Does it accomplish what it sets out to do? This is what we normally understand by the phrase ñfit for purposeò But effects and impact are hard to prove. And assessments of fitness for purpose of course depend on what the purpose is. Following Kastelliz and Mitterauer (2014), several sources of information are used by the agencies to assess impact: A comparison of outcomes in two different evaluation cycles can demonstrate development/improvements over a period of years, although it may be hard to identify the previous evaluation as the immediate cause of observed changes. Otherwise, feedback questionnaires to the institutions will inquire how they are acting, or intend to act, on the panelôs recommendations and what effects they think they can identify, or expect in the future. Effects may be discussed in formal follow-up events and agencies may conduct meta-evaluations of a sample of audits. Or they may organise seminars to discuss effects and outcomes.
When it comes to a description of *what* the observable effects typically are, the QAN text becomes more generic than specific:

> *Quality assurance agencies intend audits to have an impact; otherwise there would be no need for them. This rather vague expectation can, however, have a broad meaning: if an audit is expected to have an impact on the higher education institution's quality management system, it can be implicitly assumed that at the same time it will have an effect on the quality of all processes at the institution – learning and teaching, research and related services. This would be evidence for the fact that the quality assurance system at the institution is not an exercise carried out for its own sake, but instead correlates fully with the institution's operations. (op. cit. pp. 24 -5)*

It is worth noticing that while the *expected* effects are considerable, they are presented in hypothetical language. The crucial question is whether in fact ñit can be implicitly assumedò that an impact on the system will also mean (positive) impact on the quality of services. This goes to the core of the question of purpose, which ultimately must be to assure, support and enhance the quality of educational provision (and other core activities, if included). But the text does not provide any reference to ñevidenceòof such effects. Instead there is mention of ñsystem effectsò ñthe setting up of quality assurance units at higher education institutionsò (p. 25); the likelihood of influencing educational policy through outcome patterns (no example given); the QA agencyôs own institutional learning and development of improved processes. All these are effects that take place at spheres in the quality assurance chain that are well above the teaching and learning arenas. Do they actually trickle down to become improvements in the provision of educational programmes? Or are we faced with a method whose purpose (in a *practical* sense) stops with ñsystem qualityò?

Nearly all the 12 ôagency chaptersôthat make up the bulk of the QAN booklet have sections on impact, but few of them contain information about effects that go deeper than system and process quality. The QAA in the UK (including Scotland) is clearly the most direct in addressing the course/programme level and in linking system quality to academic standards and requirements. From their description one may at least *imagine* that the method has an effect on educational quality. But it is quite striking that after all these years of auditing only one agency (FINHEEC, Finland) seems to have conducted an effect study, however without mentioning specific effects other than a need to improve certain process details. Nor does any agency at all mention systematic evaluation of their audits, although of course there must have been internal discussion and consultation rounds between cycles. On the other hand, many agencies, based on questionnaires to audited institutions and other contacts, report that institutions express a high degree of satisfaction with current procedures. But it is worth noticing the following statement in the FINHEEC reportôs concluding section on future challenges makes:

> *One challenge associated with the audits highlighted by the Haapakorpi study[7] is related to the institutional nature of the audits: in the university departments and faculties, the audit feedback was often deemed unhelpful, as it did not focus on these levels but addressed the quality management mostly on an institutional level. (p 108)*

A reading of samples of audit reports from various agencies[8] largely confirms this picture: the overwhelming majority of descriptions, assessments, commendations and recommendations relate to arrangements and procedures at the institutional level. Even where ódrill downsôinto specific programmes or programme areas are reported, the emphasis is heavily on system quality. Of course, no one will deny the importance of centrally managed strategies, arrangements and measures in the area of quality work, but one cannot help noticing the almost total lack of references to the *results and findings* that refer to quality work at the programme level. Far from expecting that such references must necessarily imply ónaming and shamingôof specific groups or individuals, it would still be more reassuring if rounded summaries of such findings were made visible. The absence of such information invites questions whether critical self-scrutiny of educational practice actually does work effectively at the local level and if audit criteria, as they govern both institutional quality work and audit methodology, are too unspecific and undemanding in addressing the very basics of quality.
There is much to be gained by sticking to the institutional approach that audit represents: less intrusion and burden, less cost and ï most importantly ï the need for autonomous institutions to have full responsibility for the quality assurance of their activities. But the knowledge that we have ï and do *not* have ï about the effectiveness of todayôs audits indicates that may be it is time the method itself is extensively evaluated, with emphasis on the way in which criteria, procedures and the institutionsô QA systems are focusing on information about the actual delivery of educational provision. A few questions to be discussed more comprehensively might be the following:

Purpose and focus

Quality management: quality or 'performance'?

Most institutions have built up very extensive quality management systems. While generic criteria for systems and audits ï with an emphasis on institutional policy, strategy and

[7] FINHEEC Publications 12:2012. http://www.finheec.fi/files1575

[8] Such select reading cannot of course offer full justice to this report literature, and particularly not to the reports of any individual agency (See note 5). *Impressions* mentioned here are open to contradiction.

management ï contribute to keep discourse in the ósoftierô areas[9], there is also a tendency for institutions to integrate all management information needs in one large system ï or connected systems, where the identification of what exactly is *quality* assurance easily gets blurred. Institutions may be inclined to construct their systems so as to give most attention to an equally important, but slightly different purpose: *'production' performance* management, which is of course where their keenest interests lie, as the basis for resource allocations. In Austria, for example, the fulfilment of performance agreements with the Ministry is built into the audit process. But how close is the relationship between statistically documented performance and educational quality?

How does system quality connect with educational quality?

It is a well-known experience among external auditors that weaknesses are often detected in the way evaluated systems are embedded in the institutionsô discipline and programme communities. The scepticism of teaching academics towards centrally managed quality assurance is well recorded and may explain their uneven involvement. Often they will assert that they perform relevant quality work on their own, óoutsideô the formal system, as it were. This may all be good and well, but it does mean that there is a flaw, or a malfunctioning, in the system, with a lack of meaningful, systematic and aggregated reporting from the ófirst lineô level and a corresponding lack of transparency into teaching and learning quality. For institutional management and auditors alike, quality variations and challenges may be difficult to detect.

Learning outcome – and a more didactic approach to QA?

With the introduction of the Qualifications Frameworks, learning outcome should increase its importance as a quality identifier. Here the very question of defining and assessing ólearning outcomeô presents a challenge. But this is essentially a didactic task: the object would never be to arrive at absolute answers; rather, the idea must be to promote systematic work to understand and analyse formal and observed learning results, as seen in relation to learning aims and the existing battery of input and process factors, seeking reasons for problems/weaknesses and modifications that will improve student learning. Quality systems that that put their emphasis here must truly be said to be ó*enhancement-oriented*ô? Such reorientation must by necessity involve the teaching communities more than anyone else, making quality work, conducted in compliance with given criteria and institutional regulations, an integral part of the teaching task. Can we expect teaching academics to take on this ównership ô role in quality assurance? Most probably, only the criteria given by the auditing agency can push developments further in this direction.

Slimmer, more focused systems and more 'classical' auditing?

Is it time now for arguing the case for systems that are slimmer and more focused, clearly separable from other óactivity managementô systems and *essentially based on quality information from the programmes themselves*? Far from removing institutional responsibility for directing and managing this field, it would still make quality assurance more directly connected with the basic activities. It would mean an obligation for discipline/programme communities to record and report their quality work and its results and an opportunity for aggregating and analyzing this information óupwardsô to relevant levels of responsible leadership. With such information available, leaders, on their side, would have a more informed basis for executing their quality assurance responsibilities, just like external auditors would be able to follow the same information paths down to the individual

[9] The term óquality policyô has taken on great importance, as if quality policy could be so many interesting things, other than preparing the best possible ground for student learning.

programme/course, if necessary. Instead of relying more or less exclusively on set group interviews in site visits, auditing could (also) become more investigative, going by indications, assessing risk, smelling rot or roses, as it were.

Control or enhancement?

More investigative audits: then we are back to the control-enhancement dichotomy. Is not this an argument for a return to the control orientation of the financial audit? The answer may be ýyesô but it can be explained and modified: After all, the idea behind quality assurance is essentially to control ï or put more neutrally: to *find out*. And if enhancement has now become the most important objective, how can we expect real enhancement without first finding out? There are good reasons to ask (albeit somewhat rhetorically) why institutions have always been so strongly in favour of œenhancementô Is it also a matter of convenience ï a smokescreen over an unwillingness to be really transparent? And finally, there is control and there is control: if the task is more to find out than to øpunish or shameô internal assurance and external auditing could still be ófriendlyô if also ócriticalô In the last analysis, the question of ófitness for purposeô must also include an assessment of whether the enormous resources that go into external quality assurance actually yield proportional benefit in terms of information about quality. Could it all be done more simply, and more sharply?

References:

Kastelliz, D. and Mitterauer, B. (eds.): *Quality Audit in the European Higher Education Area: a Comparison of Approaches,* (Vienna, 2014)

Costes, N,; Crozier, F.; Cullen, P. et al.: *Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey* (Helsinki, 2008)

FINHEEC Publications 12:2012. http://www.finheec.fi/files1575

Information from the websites (including auudit reports) of various European agencies, e.g. in the UK (www.qaa.ac.uk and www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland)), Switzerland (www.oaq.ch), Finland (www.finheec.fi), Norway (www.nokut,no), Denmark (http://en.akkr.dk/) and the Netherlands (http://www.nvao.com/).

Questions for discussion:

The last section of the paper consists of five questions/suggestions. These would probably supply themes for discussion.