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**Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning**

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Dr Vicky Gunn will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.

### Short bio (150 words max):

Dr Vicky Gunn has 18 years of experience in institutional quality assurance processes, as well as 6 years working with the Quality Enhancement Themes at a national level in the Scottish sector, particularly in the areas of Graduate Attributes, Employability & Research-Teaching Linkages. She has successfully completed funded projects from QAA Scotland, Higher Education Academy, Royal Society of Edinburgh and publishes on teaching excellence, graduate attributes, research-teaching nexus, and student learning. Dr Ming Cheng has had 10 years experience and expertise of quality and quality assurance in higher education. She has completed five relevant empirical research projects and published one monograph, seven peer-reviewed journal articles and one book chapter based on her research findings.

**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:** Governing Student Learning: Quality Enhancements & Next Steps from a Scottish Perspective

### Abstract (150 words max):

This paper will provide a theoretical contribution to current debates on quality assurance in higher education. To refine the role of audit and enhancement, it will outline the difference between assurance and enhancement as identified in the



literature and as encountered within the Scottish Higher Education sector. The emerging trends that have arisen within the context of successive enhancement themes in Scotland and how enhancement needs to adapt as a response to these trends will be identified and analysed. The trends include: the relationships between research, education and fostering social cohesion in increasingly inter-cultural arenas; curriculum as a higher education quality dilemma; the changing nature of student representation; and learning analytics.

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

## **Introduction**

Just before the cataclysmic First World War, a former University of Iowa president, George Edwin MacLean, visited Great Britain. His goal was to observe the impact of university reforms in England and Scotland, and to identify beneficial suggestions relevant to the improvement of American universities (MacLean, 1917). Whereas many twenty-first century commentators erroneously conflate the (now) different UK university sectors (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) this is a criticism that cannot be said of MacLean. Indeed, he was quite clear that the Scottish higher education sector had a unique identity. For him, this was expressed through certain national characteristics including: a four-year degree cycle that mixed specialism and generalism; an education as much focused on the pragmatics of social mobility and work as the loftier ideals associated with the writings of Cardinal Newman; and with a sense of collective, national endeavour rather than a dominant emphasis on individual prowess. This perception of a democratic intellect seemingly running through Scottish higher education is something in which the sector has maintained pride, at least in public rhetoric (Paterson, 2013). It is also demonstrable in recent research looking at views of key stakeholders within the Scottish sector concerning core values and defining features (Riddell, 2014).

Until, recently Scotland's continued commitment to a quality process focused on enhancement rather than just assurance of learning and teaching helped it stand out. Taking on board long-standing concerns about a focus primarily on audit rather than assurance and enhancement, the Scottish QA Agency opted for an enhancement process which has two over-arching functions. It provides both:

- an institutionally relevant programme of action (which respects cluster differentiation and institutional autonomy);
- a collaborative improvement venture across the whole sector, rather than just an audit process which overly privileges procedural checks.

For Scottish quality approaches, the orientation has been towards prioritising activities of a specific, nationally determined, educational nature, with assurance providing a ubiquitous back-story. Since 2004, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been directed to a schedule of enhancement themes including employability, integrative assessment, research-teaching linkages, graduate attributes, flexible learning, and developing the curriculum. To foster a collaborative culture, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Scotland facilitates a steering group with representatives from each of the Scottish HEIs. This reports directly to the Scottish



Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), which is composed of Vice-Principals of teaching and learning as well as student representatives from all of the Scottish HEIs. Arguably, this approach to pursuing national quality enhancement provides:

- A gentle, practical, but effective restructuring of standardised and often reductive audit cultures (and, in this sense, a counter-cultural challenge to neoliberal interpretations of education);
- A horizontal driver of learning and teaching that cuts across the verticality of disciplinary specificity (which has grown increasingly dominant as a result of changes to the scale, generation and dissemination of research);
- And an enforced context of collaboration between institutions in an environment where competition within and across clusters has become an apparent norm.

In this it is the functional successor, at least in aspiration if not universality, to the ideological heritage of Scotland's democratic intellect

### **Concerns about quality assurance**

In this, the Scottish quality process has both responded to common concerns about quality procedures and led the way in time at least, as an exemplar of ameliorating some of the quality pitfalls. The four key concerns can be summarised as below. Firstly, an over-emphasis on assuring structural, organisational and managerial processes within institutions (Westerheijden, et al 2007) rather than directly ensuring the quality of student learning experiences. This can be observed from the practice that quality assurance focuses on checking the implementation of institutional quality mechanisms to decide the institutions' ability to secure the academic standards of its awards. However, the management of quality mechanisms is different from the real practice of teaching and learning in the sense that the latter focuses on individual stakeholders' work and engagement. There is evidence that the focus on organisational and managerial processes made some individual academics feel excluded from this process. For example, Cheng's (2009) research on the English quality audit culture revealed that there is tension between academics' notion of professionalism and the requirements of quality assurance, as academics felt that quality assurance was detached from their individual academic work and student learning.

Secondly, the tensions, generated between top-down formal assurance processes and bottom-up academic preferences for informal peer review for enhancement purposes, challenges the worth of audit based quality cultures (Napier, Riazzi & Jacenyik-Trawoger, 2014). There is a view among grass-root academics that quality assurance is a box-ticking exercise and that its impact on their practice of learning and teaching is rather limited (Morley, 2003; Hoecht, 2006). This has further increased the doubt on the effectiveness of quality assurance, as it appears as an expensive and bureaucratic exercise in institutions' reputation management (Brown, 2014).

Thirdly, quality assurance is perceived as a political process and as an instrument for promoting conformity in academe (Harvey & Newton, 2004). The provision of pre-



determined standards and code of practice by the Quality Assurance Agency causes a concern that quality assurance stifles the diversity of teaching and learning and increases the inequality of funding among higher education institutions (Skolnik, 2010). One example is that the decisions of quality assurance agencies have a great influence on the allocation of resources among institutions and programmes in the UK. The use of quality assurance for political purpose is also evidenced in the motives of developing quality assurance that the UK government wanted to achieve better linkage of higher education with the labour market and it distrusted the elitist attitude in universities (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). This has led to the imbalance of accountability and quality enhancement in the official goals and practice of the national quality assurance scheme (Westerheijden, 1990). Accountability here refers to ~~the~~ the obligation to report to others, explain, justify and answer questions about how resources have been used (Amaral 2007, p.38). This imbalance remains and has caused a concern that quality assurance does not enhance the quality but encourages conformity.

Fourthly, there is debate on the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement. One view is that quality assurance and quality enhancement are inseparable and work as part of a continuum. For example, Lomas (2004) argues that both approaches could lead to improvement, and that quality assurance focuses on processes and on emphasising prevention rather than cure, whereas quality enhancement requires a deliberate change process. The difference between quality assurance and quality enhancement is extensively discussed in the literature. For example, Biggs (2003) argues that quality enhancement deals with the continuing improvement of university teaching and it is about reviewing how well the institution achieves its own mission, and how it may be improved. Cheng (2011) also reveals that academics and students tend to understand quality enhancement as improvement, rather on the measurement of the threshold minimum requirements.

In this context, there has been a growing call for quality enhancement of learning and teaching worldwide. Westerheijden (2013) argues that there is a need to combine accountability with enhancement in the evaluation process. Scotland has been at the forefront of adopting an enhancement-focused approach to quality assurance which aimed at developing reflective practice within institutions since 2001.

### **Quality enhancement in the future**

The nature of the enhancement themes raises the profile of worthy topics within general education. It is, nevertheless, hard pushed to confront growing polarities in the various cultures which create the universities' inner dynamic. As structured oppositional positions emerge, tensions created by these will promote pragmatic (and not always systematically planned) resolutions. These resolutions may well close some of the contradictions, but will likely be achieved through concretising hierarchies of status within the institutions. This is especially the case in relation to academics as being either individual elite researchers or members of scholarship-informed teaching teams. In cultural capital terms at least, within our universities educational enhancement is likely to become the preserve of the latter group which will parochialise it further.



The trouble is that the themes now seem too localised and disconnected from wider demands on our institutions. Put together, escalating complexity in disciplinary/subject knowledge creation and curation; heightened awareness of student needs both domestically and internationally; and the potent paradoxes created by globalised higher education, necessitate a mixed enhancement ecosystem that brings local teaching arenas into conversation with the bigger picture. These trans-institutional issues cultivate a sector-wide tension. Effectively, they require some integration of research, teaching, community service (knowledge exchange and social cohesion), and leadership at the same time as specialised careers emerge to enable universities to fulfil the demands now being made of them.

This paper therefore argues that it is time for the higher education sector in Scotland to rethink the purpose of quality assurance structures and what role they should play in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning. Using four emerging trends that require quality governance structures, this chapter will argue that an emphasis on student learning experience through enhanced teaching strategies is a unifying framework for quality mechanisms. These trends include: the relationships between research, education and fostering social cohesion in increasingly inter-cultural arenas; curriculum as a higher educational quality dilemma; the changing nature of student representation; and learning analytics.

The key trends will be explored in the presentation as below:

- *Improving the impact of assurance through enhancement in the light of the recognized tensions between institutional and external state agendas.*

The key issue here is how best to oversee and support the relationships between research, education, and fostering social cohesion in increasingly inter-cultural arenas. This trend clearly emerged out of the Scottish Enhancement Theme (2011-13) around Graduates for 21<sup>st</sup> Century, particularly in the attempt to encourage closer links between work already undertaken in two previous enhancement themes: Employability (2004-6) and Research-Teaching Linkages: Enhancing Graduate Attributes (2009-11). An urgency to address the need for encouraging joined-up thinking between institutional practitioners and scholars doing and researching graduate attributes advancement within their universities, and researchers informing our understanding of both learning cities and rural regeneration became obvious as this work was undertaken (See: Bélanger, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Duxbury & Campbell, 2011; Morgan, 2009; Yang, 2012).

- *Curriculum as an higher educational quality dilemma.*

The most recent Scottish Enhancement theme, drew together previous themes under the heading of Developing and Supporting the Curriculum. Ultimately, what this demonstrated in some of the institutions was the extent to which curricular drift is unavoidable in the current academic recruitment patterns into the various

disciplines and, quality assurance, particularly for general degrees, does not prevent such drift. Yet, to fulfil the social, economic and cultural responsibilities of higher education, it is clear that curricular drift monitoring needs to occur or students need to be empowered to map their pathways through a degree effectively to ensure they graduate with a range of demonstrable outcomes. At one Scottish institution, as part of its engagement with quality enhancement, an internal process of such monitoring is being explored. The process is known as curriculum mapping and assessment blueprinting and if led by students, would require enhancement across the sector in the following ways:

1. The need for students to be supported but ultimately lead in identifying opportunities for their development using the outcomes of CMAB;
2. The need for students to be assessed *across* courses as well as within courses to foster transfer and adaptation of aspects of learning and development outwith course silos;
3. The need for students to engage with CMAB and use the outputs from CMAB to determine when and how they might engage in broader extra-curricular activities to fill gaps in their graduate attributes development. This could include linking reflection on CMAB outcomes with opportunities to undertake student-led, service-oriented or other socio-economic activity as well as mobility internationally within the duration of their studies;
4. The possibility of being mentored to lead the process of curriculum mapping and assessment blueprinting as part of endeavours to enable co-creation of the curriculum within an institutional context.

In short, consideration needs to be given to the introduction of systems and structures that enable students to lead on and take responsibility for using the outcomes of CMAB processes to design their own developmental pathways. This in turn feeds into:

- *Democratizing student representation through co-creation of the curriculum:*  
Despite adoptions of student representation as a central tenet of quality (Little and Williams, 2010; QAA, 2014), there is a lack of consensus on what student engagement is. This is evident as partnership roles of students in quality processes are coming to be defined and operationalized both within and beyond a Scottish context. The tendency of universities has been to see student representation in the functioning of our universities as best achieved through identifiable student experts rather than a process centred on responsible engagement across all aspects of learning and teaching.
- *Engaging Learning Analytics ethically:*  
Learning Analytics (using large data sets gathered at an institutional level to observe trends and outcomes in student experience over time) is likely to make the design of current quality audits too simplistic. As resources into the universities fluctuate, pressure to effectively (rather than adequately) demonstrate



impact from investment will change the sentiment and type of the evidence we are expected to deliver to our governments. Increasingly what we will need is: an assurance body that can check that the learning analytics processes we have in place are primarily about learning and teaching enhancement, and ethically established and maintained.

## Conclusion

To summarize, this chapter argues for the promotion of learning-based quality enhancement, with a better balance between accountability and improvement. It highlights that emerging from enhancement themes activities has been a need for a renewed conceptual framework that collocates equally: quality enhancement as a dialogue between local teaching and learning needs and broader societal ones within a quality approach directly connected to research impact agendas; quality enhancement as a facilitator of student-led engagement with their curricular and development needs. This recognises the current limitations of quality processes to promote change in learning outcomes which cross the divide between immediate disciplinary educational needs and broader societal ones. Such a framework would attempt to reconcile ways of thinking (specialist and generalist) generated by higher education, knowledge structures emerging in research communities within the universities, and methods of enhancing learning and teaching which enable a degree of student-led demand (Campbell & Carayannis, 2012).

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#### **Questions for discussion:**

1. How to achieve the balance between accountability and improvement in the process of quality enhancement?
2. What are the pros and cons of encouraging student-led engagement with their curricular and development needs?