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### Yogis and Commissars: Learning, Teaching and Quality in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Institutional Audit Methodology (2007-11)

#### Yogis and Commissars

The title of this paper is based in part on an essay written in 1945 by the American author Arthur Koestler, in which he contrasts two stylised extremes of human behaviour – that of the yogi on the one hand and the commissar on the other. Yogis are contemplative, free thinking, individualistic and spiritual. Conversely, commissars are doctrinaire, compliant, bureaucratic and temporal<sup>1</sup>. Sixty years later, though stripped of its original political and historical context, the archetypal distinction between yogis and commissars is still recognisable in aspects of organisational behaviour. In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) there is a commonly held view that a similar contrast exists between the Learning and Teaching (L&T) community on the one hand and the Quality Assurance (QA) community on the other. By the L&T community is meant all those who teach students and otherwise facilitate their learning, as well as the national agencies and university centres that articulate their interests. By the QA community is meant those agencies and offices – external and internal – that oversee the management of quality and standards within HEIs.

In most HEIs, these two communities tend to have complementary missions but, historically at least, quite separate cultures. This paper argues that such separation is no longer tenable because of recent changes made by the QAA to its institutional audit methodology. The most important of these changes is the growing emphasis on Quality Enhancement (QE) and, within that emphasis, the explicit connection made by the Agency between QE and institutional L&T strategies. As a result, the QAA's new audit methodology requires the QA and L&T/QE communities to work together more cohesively than they may have done in the past, and this joint activity has given birth to yet another acronym, QAE (Quality Assurance and Enhancement) which, in some respects, has still to be fully realised.

#### Quality Enhancement and Quality Assurance

It may seem unfair to posit from the outset a degree of dislocation between the QA and QE communities, (and overly exclusive to identify QE first and foremost with L&T), but the fact is that a number of commentators do indeed see the QA and QE communities as being about as antipodal as yogis and commissars. The L&T community is seen essentially as an 'enquiring culture' (Jackson, 2002), which espouses values such as originality, individual and group reflection, shared activity with peers, action research – all values that are considered intrinsic to teaching activity. In contrast, the QA community is seen as creating a 'compliance culture' (ibid), which is unremittingly bureaucratic, led by codes of practice written in legalistic language by administrators rather than academics and policed internally by Quality Offices and externally by quality watchdogs such as the QAA, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and a range of professional bodies. Little wonder that there is a tendency to see Quality Assurance as extrinsic to teaching activity, as a process inflicted on teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Similar distinctions had been made earlier by Julien Benda in *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927).

Raban (2007, p. 78) refers to what he calls the 'audit culture' and the 'bureaucratisation of quality', arguing that the QA systems derived from the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) processes of the 1970s and 1980s promote 'unintelligent accountability' and seem 'unhelpfully dirigiste and burdensome' nowadays. Mathias comments more benignly but in the same vein in his article 'Putting the "E" into "QA"':

*'A well-meaning bureaucratic QA industry has gradually evolved, which appears to many teachers to issue guidelines on policy and practice with little by way of real consultation with practitioners and the reality of their experience, and by being not particularly informed by academic scholarship and research into higher education teaching ... Implicitly, this can send a message that QA and QE are things that are done to academics rather than with them or by them.'*

(Mathias, 2003, p. 3)

These observations will strike a chord among some lecturers in higher education, who see themselves as being forced to comply with internal quality processes that seem unduly heavy-handed, that they have not themselves elaborated and for which they may not even agree there is a need. The problem lies in part with the bureaucratic nature of some internal quality processes, in particular annual monitoring, approval and periodic review of courses, which are couched in regulatory terminology and accompanied by metrics of varying relevance and accuracy, both of which are alien to the core learning and teaching activity of many lecturers.

### **Quality and standards**

There is no better example of the problems regulatory terminology can cause than the distinction between quality and standards. For the QA community this is a fundamental distinction, without which the purpose of QE cannot be fully understood, but the distinction is far from clear to those outside that community. Many lecturers, for example, tend to use the terms interchangeably.

By *standards* the QAA essentially means nationally benchmarked levels of student achievement. These are defined in a number of ways, two of which are key: firstly, by the Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ), which provides discipline-independent statements about the knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate at the different levels of higher education, ranging from Access to taught postgraduate; secondly, by over 60 discipline-specific subject Benchmark Statements written by academics, which put flesh on the bones of the FHEQ and customise it to suit the expectations of those teaching and researching in a given field. Along with any additional expectations of relevant Public, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), the FHEQ and Benchmark Statements constitute important *external reference points* at approval events and are reflected in Programme Specifications (referred to as Pathway Specifications at Anglia Ruskin). There is something more than faintly Napoleonic about standards and while they may be revised periodically, they have to be regarded as *givens* at any one moment in time. For this reason, they cannot be the object of enhancement activity for individual HEIs.

By *quality* the QAA essentially means the ways in which individual HEIs manage the student experience so as to ensure that students will attain the *standards* expected. To become remotely meaningful, this all-embracing concept has to be broken down into a range of different areas, and this is exactly what institutional audit visits do. Key areas include the range of academic, personal, administrative and vocational support students receive, the learning resources that the HEI provides for them, whether their voice is listened to, and whether the feedback they provide via module evaluation results is acted upon. Other key areas include the use made by HEIs of management information, ranging from module marks through progression and completion statistics to external examiners' reports, and the effectiveness of their policies in respect of learning, teaching and assessment. The list of key areas goes on, but the point is that it consists of activities that, unlike standards, can be improved on. In other words, they can and should be the object of enhancement activities for HEIs.

Importantly, there is no need to restrict the list to academic activities – students are very sensitive to the accuracy of the publicity they receive from HEIs prior to admission, about the efficiency and user-friendliness of administrative or technical support services, about libraries and their opening hours and about the quality of teaching accommodation and learning resources.

So, when one factors in the input of the many support services to the overall student learning experience, and the proportion of the working week that students spend interacting with them rather than being taught, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide where academic quality, let alone the *enhancement* of academic quality, starts and finishes.

This is borne out by a survey of the relevant literature, which substantiates the view that enhancement is indeed ‘a rich, complex idea’ (Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)-Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE)-Higher Education Staff Development Agency (HESDA), 2003, p. 3). Commentators distinguish between types of enhancement in many ways, including constituency (teachers only, or all staff in a student-facing role) (ibid), a retrospective or prospective outlook (Raban, 2007, p. 81), relationship with Total Quality Management (Becket & Brookes, 2006, pp. 124-5), and impact, i.e. minor change, incremental change or transformational change (LTSN, 2002, p. 4, LTSN-ILTHE-HESDA, 2003, p. 3).

At present, therefore, HEIs still have the opportunity to view enhancement from a variety of perspectives and, in a very real sense, to mould it in their own image. In the medium term, quality enhancement is likely to move well beyond the traditional boundaries of quality assurance to become an institutional approach to managing the improvement of most aspects of the student experience. This is certainly within the scope of the definitions of enhancement offered by both the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the QAA. It follows that the greater its pervasiveness, the less likely it becomes that the enhancement of quality can be managed by a culturally separate QA community acting in relative isolation from L&T and the student experience in the broadest sense.

### **Enhancement: HEA and QAA definitions**

The HEA sees QE in higher education as:

*‘a deliberate process of change that leads to improvement ..... Teachers and HE Institutions voluntarily engage in QE both in order to improve student learning and their experiences of HE and to respond to the ever changing needs and interests of society. Voluntary participation in QE is driven by the same values that drive personal learning and facilitate the learning of others.*

*‘It is an inclusive concept and a collective enterprise. It involves everyone who teaches, supports and guides students and the managers and administrators of HE institutions. It includes significant strategic initiatives and the many small things that people do to try to make things better’.*

(<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/896.htm>)

The QAA’s Handbook for institutional audit defines QE as:

*‘an aspect of institutional quality management that is designed to secure, in the context of the constraints within which individual institutions operate, steady, reliable and demonstrable improvements in the quality of learning opportunities.’*

(QAA, 2006, p. 16)

There is no shortage of adjectives or pleonasms in the sections of the Handbook describing enhancement, which consists variously of *deliberate steps* (p. 46) involving *planned approaches* (p. 50) that are *no less systematic* (p. 46) and *no less based on clear strategic planning* than quality assurance (p. 46). All this applies to postgraduate research degree provision as well as to all taught provision (p. 8), and audit reports are now required to comment specifically on the former.

The Agency's insistence on these points is indicative of two things: firstly, the broader and deeper its links with other institutional (and national) reference points, the more QE is likely to take root in institutions; secondly, *planned, systematic and strategic* activity necessarily provides written records that are amenable to audit. This is made clear in the sections of the Handbook that explain how audit teams will operate.

*Audit teams will consider the ways in which institutional-level approaches to quality enhancement make systematic use of management information. Such information may come from external examiners or advisers; from external bodies such as PSRBs and the Higher Education Academy; from students, graduates and employers, from the outcomes of internal review procedures; and from internal policies, such as may be part of the institution's learning and teaching strategy. Quality enhancement has much to do with the way in which institutions collect, analyse and use information from internal and external sources.*

(QAA, 2006, p. 17)

It follows that when elaborating their approach to enhancement, HEIs must do so formally, by tracking the development and implementation of enhancement-led activities through their policy-making and committee structures and by continually reviewing their effectiveness. Because the Agency perceives close links between enhancement and L&T, HEIs need to be clear about how the L&T Unit is to operate in terms of its external reference points, its role in approval, periodic review and annual monitoring activity and its contribution to the achievement of incremental and transformational change. Equally though, and paraphrasing Raban (earlier in paper), HEIs need to ensure that their L&T activities do not lead to the *bureaucratisation of enhancement* in the same way as they have led to the 'bureaucratisation of quality'. There is a real danger of over-complexity and reduced impact if the annual action plans deriving from institutional L&T Strategies, perhaps interpreted at each of faculty, departmental and programme levels, give rise to hundreds of action points, each of which needs implementing, reporting and reviewing. In HEIs where this happens, audit teams will need to check whether the institutional L&T strategy is, or is not, equal to the sum of its parts.

Judging by the latest addition to QAA's Outcomes from Institutional Audit series, 'Institutions' Intentions for Enhancement' (2007), audit teams are likely to be asking this very question about institutional approaches to enhancement in general. This paper provides an overview of enhancement in the outcomes of 58 institutional audit reports published by August 2006, observing rather tartly that:

*In the context of the close interest that institutions in England and Northern Ireland have professed in the enhancement-led approach that has developed in Scotland since 2001, it is ... surprising to find only a few institutions ... identifying their approach to quality as 'enhancement-led'.*

(QAA, 2007b, p. 3)

The report goes on to give examples of lack of a shared view of enhancement within HEIs, with a concomitant lack of overarching strategy and strategic planning. It continues:

*'Many of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 identify institutional approaches to quality enhancement which appear to consist of individual, granular initiatives without a clear overall rationale .... Several reports recommend that the relevant institutions adopt a more strategic approach to the enhancement of their arrangements for managing quality and academic standards.'*

(QAA, 2007b, p. 4)

This use of the word 'granular' probably refers to the common practice in HEIs of identifying and highlighting 'pockets' of enhancement activity within existing QA processes originally designed to serve different purposes. The challenge English HEIs face is to define what they mean by enhancement, as opposed to assurance, and to find the least complex and most effective ways of achieving it. In this regard they may find the experience of Scottish HEIs instructive.

## **The QAA's approach to Enhancement in Scotland**

In Scotland a strategic approach to quality enhancement which requires Scottish HEIs to have explicit institutional enhancement strategies has been used since the adoption of Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) in 2004.

Both the English and Scottish approaches make it absolutely clear that the enhancement of quality depends upon the assurance of quality and standards, but there is a degree of nuancing in the way in which this is stated. While the English Handbook says in effect that *assurance includes enhancement* (QAA, 2006, p.16), the Scottish Handbook puts it the other way round – *enhancement includes assurance* (QAA, 2003, p. 10).

Given that both systems consider assurance to be a pre-requisite for enhancement, does it really matter if assurance is seen as a sub-set of enhancement, or vice-versa? The answer is that the distinction flags priorities and that its significance is likely to grow to the extent that the goals and scope of assurance and enhancement diverge. Interestingly, the reviews of ELIR commissioned so far by the QAA acknowledge the tensions between assurance and enhancement and, in the first year of operation, some uncertainty on the part of HEIs as to where the emphasis of the new methodology lay (QAA, 2004, p. 9). However, significant progress seems to have been made between 2003-6, as HEIs in Scotland have accustomed themselves to the new methodology. The QAA's recent review of ELIR (QAA, 2007a) indicates that some of the changes Scottish HEIs have had to make in evolving new enhancement-led systems are very far-reaching, particularly in respect of their committee structures and in the articulation of QAE processes with wider institutional strategies and national strategies for transformational change.

In respect of transformational change, the raising of quality enhancement to a level of strategic importance seems to have taken the Scottish approach some way beyond the territory traditionally occupied by quality assurance to include, for example, adaptation to widening participation and globalisation. This provides a sense of *wider purpose* for enhancement that translates into sector-wide enhancement themes such as 'Employability', 'The First Year' and 'Flexible Delivery', which have the potential to build up familiar aspects of quality assurance into motors for collective change.

The English approach, in contrast, says almost nothing as yet about the wider purpose of enhancement. It repeatedly posits strong and necessary linkage between quality enhancement and the use of management information, but makes few connections between enhancement and institutional strategy, other than an institution's learning and teaching strategy (QAA, 2006, Sec 48, p.17).

While it is unlikely for a number of reasons that the ELIR audit methodology will be adopted in its entirety in England, shifting the balance of audit activity towards enhancement is surely here to stay. The *Findings* section of institutional audit reports now includes a section on the Institution's Approach to Quality Enhancement, and the new Institutional Quality Enhancement Review (IQER) methodology will shortly be implemented to support and audit HE in further education.

## **Quality Enhancement – Repurpose or Redesign?**

Opinion varies as to whether an institutional approach to quality enhancement can be best achieved by repurposing existing QA practices to augment their potential for enhancement, or whether more radical redesign is required.

An example of the former might be the repurposing of annual monitoring so that significantly greater emphasis is placed on its prospective rather than retrospective function. In propounding an approach to QAE they call 'Quality Risk Management', Raban and Turner (2006) suggest that the architecture of quality assurance is in need of modernisation. They argue that responsibility for identifying and assessing academic risks should lie with those who do the teaching – front-line staff who are best positioned to analyse internal and external trends in their academic and professional communities and to predict likely future developments. On the same grounds as Jackson (2002, p. 8), they argue that in an increasingly turbulent academic environment, the purpose of annual monitoring is less to describe a Programme's

operation over the previous academic year than to identify risks to the provision over the coming year. Consideration is then given to heading off those risks and this becomes the motor for both quality assurance and enhancement. Interestingly, at least one HEI has already replaced Annual Monitoring Reports with Annual Strategic Reports, and this has been commented on favourably by the QAA.

A number of commentators argue for more wide-reaching reform to existing QA practices. Biggs (2002) points out the limitations of retrospective QA and argues that for enhancement to occur

*'The institution needs ... to establish built-in mechanisms that allow it, like the individual reflective teacher, to continually review and improve current practice. New content knowledge, educational innovations, a changing student population, and changing conditions in the institution and in society, all make such a review necessary.'*

(Biggs, 2002, p. 3)

We should note here *en passant* that Biggs relates enhancement to transformational change such as widening participation and technological development, in a manner that anticipates the Scottish ELIR approach.

One of the central mechanisms Biggs identifies as being crucial to helping HEIs deal with transformational change is staff development in learning, teaching and assessment through direct linkage of departmental enhancement activity with the work of University Centres for Learning and Teaching (UCLTs). He argues, however, that the model adopted by many UCLTs of staging workshops that teachers attend on a voluntary basis is inadequate, since such workshops reach only a minority of practitioners who are quite probably the good teachers anyway. Enhancement is most likely to occur through mechanisms located at departmental level, involving all staff, and with support from the UCLT.

And if there is one common theme in the literature it is that unlike QA, QE is a bottom-up activity that can only be achieved with the engagement of the people who teach and otherwise deal with students. Mathias (2003) talks about 'engaging hearts and minds' in order to facilitate a deep approach to the teaching role, and states that 'educational development must be relocated where it has always belonged – within an academic rather than an administrative environment'. (Mathias, 2003, p. 5). The LTSN creative thinking group concurs (LTSN-ILTHE-HESDA, 2003, p. 2), but then goes on to give one of the more extensive accounts of what (re)designing an approach to Quality Enhancement would involve:

*'Quality enhancement is a "systems" concept requiring systems thinking ... It involves all the people who teach, assess, support and administer students' learning and the resources that support learning, the regulatory and support infrastructures used to ensure that teaching and learning is of an appropriate standard and quality ... It involves structures, processes, procedures, incentives and cultures. The problem of designing a quality enhancement system for teaching and learning is inherently complex because of the nature of the higher education enterprise ....'*

(LTSN-ILTHE-HESDA, 2003, p. 11)

## **Conclusions**

Faced with the QAA's new interest in enhancement, English HEIs are currently engaged in identifying and highlighting 'pockets' of enhancement activity within existing QA processes and considering ways in which their Learning and Teaching strategies can become a stronger vehicle for enhancement. This is probably a pragmatic approach to the new emphasis on enhancement, particularly in respect of minor and some types of incremental change, but the price paid is that the institutional whole is less than the sum of its parts and, as its Outcomes paper (2007) indicates, the QAA is wise to this.

In the medium term, therefore, HEIs will have to go further than identifying contingent connections between pockets of enhancement activity within existing QA practices. A coherent institutional approach to QE, one that takes 'deliberate steps' to effect transformative change, will rely heavily on the participation of a number of staff constituencies within HEIs, particularly student-facing constituencies. It will need to provide

communication channels between those constituencies and, as the recent QAA report on ELIR indicates, this is likely to lead to substantial changes in management and committee structures (QAA, 2007a, p. 6). It will rely on a balance of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' initiatives that can secure the engagement of teaching staff and locate it in a strategic context.

Enhancement is premeditated, intended, planned, and good practice only 'counts as' enhancement if it can be seen to result from pre-existing institutional strategies and policies. Consequently, the 'deliberate steps' leading from conceptualisation to actualisation need to be recorded if they are to count in an institution's favour when it is audited. This means that the time has come for the L&T community and other student-facing services to join forces with the QA community to design the blueprint for a single, joined-up set of QAE processes that meet the requirements of all parties and align with the strategic directions in which the institution is travelling. In this way, the antipodal characteristics of the yogi and the commissar might finally synthesise to produce processes that are reflective and intelligent as well as systematic and consistent.

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