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INVOLVING TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction:-In January 2001 the government agency that oversees universities in Sweden (Hogskoleverket) introduced a new system of quality assessment. Whereas previously audits had been carried out at the institutional level the new system was aimed at assuring the quality of subjects and programmes. The change of focus was due, according to the agency, to increasing demands from society that universities deliver quality education to a more numerous and more diverse clientele (see Hoogskoleverkets rapportserie 2001:9). As Sweden's economy slowed down in the late nineteen nineties the government insisted that the universities give 'value for money'. At 1.7% of GNP the amount of money invested in higher education was by no means trivial. The hope was that 50% of all Swedes would receive a higher education before the age of 25 and that such an educated workforce would help maintain Sweden's good standard of living. To ensure this, higher education had to be more relevant and of a higher quality. Hogskoleverket (hereafter HSV) was concerned by falling numbers of university applicants and by an apparent dissatisfaction among students with the quality of university teaching. A survey of students at a large technical university in Gooteborg (Eklof and Svensson, 2000) showed that only 43% of the 4004 respondents thought that their teachers were good or very good. The issue of teacher competence was also raised in newspaper articles and letters to the editor.

Quality Control:-

In the past, quality control of teaching, learning and research had been left to te universities. HSV checked on the mechanisms universities had in place to assure quality and kept an eye on student progression rates, publication records and research grants with in the different universities. By the turn of the century, however, a shrinking economy, growing problems in meeting social welfare payments and a crisis in the health system made the Swedish government particularly sensitive to complaints about the quality of higher education. A government bill (1999/2000:28) gave HSV a new role in quality assessment. HSV recruited staff to organize a regular cycle of course and program audits. Experts and students in a particular field were invited to form panels with the object of thoroughly reviewing each of the major university disciplines once every six years. To ensure such audits were taken seriously universities were warned that if a course or program had serious defects and those defects were not remedied with in a year then the right to award a degree in those programmes could be revoked.

The new Swedish system was partly inspired by the British Quality Assurance Agency (hereafter QAA). There are similarities and differences between the two. The QAA system is now well established and exerts a great deal of influence on how universities deal with quality assurance. Many British universities endeavour to put in place an overall quality control system that is consistent across faculties and matches the QAA model. In Sweden the new audit system complements the existing self evaluation process that universities engage in but is also likely that the audits will have an impact on the way these processes evolve. The most common objection to the British system is that it promotes 'a culture of compliance' within the universities. Harvey and Knight (1996:97) have pointed out that the demands on teaching staff to respond to external monitoring can adversely affect efforts to enhance the student experience.

leagues table showing the best and worst universities. This practice has recently been abandoned after an investigation that recommended changes to the quality assurance system in the United Kingdom. In this paper

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we are particularly interested in defining quality assessment because we feel that it holds the key to a quality degree. The questions we want to ask in this paper are: Do external audits encourage teachers and students to continuously develop better ways of encouraging and assessing meaningful learning, or Do they rather lead to a 'culture of compliance' whereby assessment methods endorsed by the audit team become those used by the teachers and learners.

There need not be a conflict here. Hopefully reviewers, most of whom are teachers and students themselves, will espouse the best possible forms of assessment. Unfortunately, the process is bigger than the individuals involved. Quality audits are born in a political arena and their purpose is political as well as pedagogical. Comparisons may be odious but HSV is committed to making them. If HSV have to make judgement about particular programmes within a subject area, chemistry for example, it is inevitable that it will end up making comparisons. There is always the danger that HSV will select compare rather than specifically suited to one group of students and their particular context. When funding is attached to the results of such audits, the audit itself and how to give the auditors what they expect, can take over from creating a better course. The danger is pedagogical compliance rather than pedagogical creativity.

Defining Quality:-

In order sustain such an argument we need to define what we mean by quality. We also need to refer to the definitions thatagencies, like QAA and HSV use. Te new Oxford dictionary defines quality as excellence or a degree of excellence. In this meaning quality can also be thought of as the 'best of its kind', a standard against which similar things are measured. The problem with the dictionary definition is that one has to go on and debate what is meant by excellence. In the area of higher education, some people, Boyle and Bowden (1997) for instance, think that debate on the term itself is a waste of time. 'Most progressive thinkers', they say, 'and those motivated by positive practical outcomes, have moved on from the endless esoteric debates on conceptions of quality'. We acknowledge attempting to define quality can drive you mad (as it did Phraedrus in Pirsig's book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance) but think it is important to try. Boyle and Bowden's view is that we should simply accept 'fitness for purpose' (Ball, 1985) as the most workable definition. But this definition has its own problems because it ignores multiple or competing purposes. Even if the debate about quality can not be resolved it is essential to engage in it. Not to do so is to give the field to those who have the power to enforce their purpose.

Quality as 'excellence or goodness' was the definition preferred by philosophers. 'Fitness for purpose', is the definition preferred by business people. It is, incidentally, in the world of business tat both the definition 'fitness for purpose' and the quality assurance movement has its origins. The definition works well because the aim of business is straightforward. Most businesses intend to make a profit, and the steadier and more longterm those profits are, the better. Quality is therefore assured when the process of production, distribution and sales fits the stated aims and purpose of the company – the largest possible long-term profit. In determining quality assurance procedures a lot of emphasis is placed on criteria or attributes that maximize profit. Things such as speed, economy and efficiency tend to the precedence. Another way of describing this conception of quality is 'value for money' (Harvey and Green, 1993). 'Fitness for purpose' has gained such wide acceptance that it is applied today in more complicated contexts – universities for example. The British, Hong Kong, Netherlands, Scandinavian and Australian quality assurance agencies make use of it. But 'fitness for purpose' begs an extremely important question. 'Whose purpose?'. In industry the answer is easy: the shareholders or owners. But who owns the university? And what is its purpose?

In the eye of the beholder:-

Perhaps we can illustrate the problem of how different people can see different purposes for the same activity by means of an anecdote. The vice-chancellor of a large technical university received complimentary

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tickets from Volvo for a performance of Schubert's unfinished symphony. Because he had a prior engagement he have them to his total quality management officer, a man called Sven whom he had recently recruited from the car maker's staff development section. Te next day in the coffee room he asked WSven what did he think of the quality of the performance. 'Well' said Sven, 'I thought you might ask, so I sent you an email about it'. When the boss opened his email there was Sven's message under the heading. My thoughts on Schubert's unfinished symphony. 'For considerable periods of time', he wrote, 'the four oboe players had nothing to do. The number should be reduced and spread over the whole orchestra thus eliminating peaks of activity. All of the twelve violin players were playing identical notes. This seemed an unnecessary duplication and the staff of this section should be cut drastically. No useful purpose is served by repeating with horns the passage were eliminated the concert could be reduced be half. Had Schubert attended to these matters he would probably have been able to finish his symphony after all".

An important point of the story is that the quality expert saw the performance in terms of his own prevailing paradigm, a paradigm that he accepted unthinkingly after years of trying to improve production in a large car manufacturing plant. His paradigm suited Volvo. It might even suit the student enrolment process at a big university where speed and efficiency are desirable characteristics. But Sven's paradigm did not suit a musical performance, Nor, we would argue, would it suit the quality assurance of teaching, learning and assessment at a university. Sven had very little expertise when it came to judging music. Judgement about the quality of a musical performance is better left to a music critic. Just as judgement about the assessment of learmning is better left to teachers and learners.

' Fitness for purpose' is only helpful if we can clearly define the purpose of the university and the various activities within a university. Assessing students, for examples, is a different sort of activeity form enrolling them and the quality of each process has to be defined by different sorts of criteria. In the past, when universities were elite institutions rather tan a part of mass education , there was consensus about its purpose. The university's purpose was to pursue new knowledge, pass on established knowledge and serve the wider community. Ideally it pursued these goals in an atmosphere of academic freedom. Today this ideal lives on in the mission statements of most universities. Te large technical university, mentioned above, declares that 'All of our activity is to be characterised by academic freedom, responsibility and the will to achieve results of the highest international quality'.

Contemporary Challenges for Quality Assurance and Accreditation

New educational and training media such as the internet, one and two way video, and other electronic media allow delivery of instruction independently of time and distance, often to populations who otherwise would not benefit from such resources. Moreover, the dissolution of traditional educational hierarchies and other systems designed as much to exclude certain populations as they were to assure "quality" have opened the higher education "club" to vast new populations. This new paradigm creates great opportunities for both educators and learners in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and in some cases, cost. However, it also creates significant challenges for quality assurance and accreditation. As the joint statement of the Regional Accrediting Commissions on the Evaluation of Electronically offered Degree and Certificate Programs suggests, "While these are welcome developments, the new delivery systems test conventional assumptions, raising fresh questions as to the nature and content of an educational experience and the resources required tor provide it" (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2000). Tis suggestion is almost certainly understated. David A. Longanecker, former Assistant Secretary for postsecondary education at the U.S. Department of Education, and current Executive Director of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, adds that new educational delivery models are "leading us to a very different concept of quality assurance than we've traditionally had- but I'm not sure wat that is' (Olsen, 1999). Mr. Longanecker's comment reveals the difficulty

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of matching new realities to old thinking and the fact that even the "leaders" in the accreditation world are struggling to understand the implications of 21st century education for quality assurance.

While the vast majority of the world's population is still not able to pursue "higher education," the explosive growth in the number and diversity of today's students, and the impact of technology, cross-border issues, politics, economics, language and culture, and the dissolution of traditional educational hierarchies, present challenges for quality assurance and accreditation that were unimaginable just a quarter century ago. Whether we are speaking of corporate training, continuing education, academic courses, or even entire degree Programs, the traditional mainstays of quality assurance such as physical attendance, "contact hours," proctored testing, formal academic credentials for instructors/trainers, library holdings, and other factors are often impractical or simply irrational in today's educational reality. For example, in an asynchronous online "class" there may be little or no relationship between the amount of time a learner is "logged in" and his or her productivity and learning. In this case, the whole notion of attendance becomes moot. Similarly, in many content specific or information technology training settings, the most effective instructor for the job may not even possess a baccalaureate degree, let alone an advanced degree. Moreover, geographic boundaries no longer apply to educational access. A course offered by a British university may be taught by a Malaysian professor from multiple locations with student domiciled in Asia, North America and Europe. Who accredits such a course and based on what criteria? To whom is the British University accountable and based on what standards? Does it matter in what language the instruction is delivered? What resources are available for student research? These questions will only become more pressing as new models of distributed learning take hold early in the 21st century.

New Paradigms for Accreditation and Quality Assurance

As a result of the challenges mentioned in this paper, many traditional academic and professional accrediting bodies are struggling with sometimes blatant mismatches between traditional accrediting paradigms and new educational realities. It may be that the traditional accrediting bodies are not, in fact, the most appropriate entities for developing new, more relevant quality assurance and accrediting paradigms. For example, believes that the rivate sector, not government will establish "consumer-based" means of judging quality. "Such entrepreneurs might produce a distance-education version of Amazon.com, which lets buyers read reviews of books the company sells online. Another model… is the online-auction company eBay, which permits buyers to rate sellers of auctioned items" (Carnevale, 2000). Or, it may be that consortia involving instructional providers, learners, professional organizations and the business community are better equipped to develop the criteria for determining quality. In Other words, it may make more sense to have "end users," for whom quality is of the utmost importance, play a central role in quality assurance processes. In fact, the very structures, processes, and criteria that govern the work of traditional accreditation bodies may be counterproductive in today's educational reality! It may also be that "accreditation" per say is no longer a productive construct. As long as parties with a common interest can work within a mutually agreeable framework, a dramatic "paradigm shift" away form the traditional accrediting bodies may be not only viable but preferable. One possibility being pursued by the Distance Education-Quality Assurance Initiative at Benjamin Franklin University is the adoption of ISO. 9000 Quality System standards, in use by 350,000 organizations in over 150 countries, for use in distance education (Benjamin Franklin University, 2001).

Another compelling "paradigm shift" may be to accredit the learner or the instructor rather tan the institution. In other words, if the learner can demonstrate achievement of certain benchmarks of knowledge and skill, the individual would be "certified" rather than the institution providing instruction. This is already a powerful trend in information technology whereby industry certification, e.g., Microsoft, Cisco and others have more currency in the marketplace than academic degrees, regardless of the status of the degree granting

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institution. Western Governors University in the United States awards degrees bases upon the learner's ability to demonstrate "competencies" rather than credits, so there is no required number of classes to graduate! Dr. Guy Bensusan of Northern Arizona University is currently developing a system whereby buyers (students) would go directly to sellers (instructors) and evaluate their products (classes) before deciding whether or not to register for a course. He terms this process "disintermediation" of educational delivery.

Similarly, as the diversity of student populations continues to increase and the variety of educational opportunities likewise grows at a tremendous rate, it may be time to move the focus in quality assurance toward a predominantly outcomes or product based model (as has been the case in business) and away from a focus on the process or the medium (as has been the case with traditional accreditation). In short, it may not even be possible to address 21st century distributed models of education and training with their concomitant political, economic, demographic, cultural, technological, and trans-national challenges via traditional models of quality assurance or accreditation. Returning to the example earlier in the paper of a course developed and offered by a British university and taught by a Malaysian instructor to students on three continents, even if it were possible to get multiple governments (national and local) and multiple accrediting bodies or ministries of education to agree upon the "legitimacy" of the course, would we want to spend time, energy and money on this process? Moreover, if the learner wants the product and the market values it, does "accreditation" ultimately matter? Does the market itself in some way, provide a level of quality assurance? Certainly, most of us would not be comfortable assuming that an educational product is a quality product simply because it is valued in the marketplace. Nonetheless, we would be foolish to ignore the fact that ultimately, because of the very nature of learning, learners (or customers) are able to choose from a multitude of education offerings regardless of what or anyone else believes about the quality or legitimacy of such products. We would also be native not to recognize that education as become a commodity. It can be bought, sold, and transferred just like any other commodity. And educational providers, whether not-for-profit, public, private, or proprietary, are all ultimately bottom-line driven. If an institution's products do not have market value the institution will not have a market.

Quality assurance in the 21st century, then, may very likely have more of a business orientation than a traditional educational one-not because "business is better," but because market forces may dictate how educational "products" are delivered and evaluated. Accreditation and quality assurance will likely be different in other ways as well as noted in the table below.

Table 1:

Old Versus New Paradigms for Accreditation and Quality Assurance

Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Teacher/Institution Centered	Learner Centered
Centralized	Local
Hegemonistic	Deferential
One Size Fits All	Tailored
Closed	Open
Us versus Them	Collaborative
Quantitative	Qualitative
Prescriptive	Flexible
Time as Constant/Learning as Variable	Learning as Constant/Times as Variable
Teacher Credentials	Teacher skills
Consolidated Experience	Aggregated Experience
Regional/National	International/Global
Static	Dynamic
Single Delivery Model	Distributed Delivery Model
Process	Outcomes
Infrastructure	Services

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Finding Agreement:-

In industry, ownership and purpose are intertwined. This is not so in the modern university where both ownership and purpose are contested issues. Governments, especially around election time, insist that they are the representatives of the people and since the people's taxes pay for the university's infrastructure and pay for the universities' running costs the people, in effect, own the university. Since industry shares the cost of university research with government (about 50-50 these days) they too can lay claim to part ownership. The university council, especially if it is endowed with private funding, feels it owns the university. And the administrators, teachers, researchers and students who make up the university feel that they are the rightful owners.

If all these groups agreed on the university's purpose then defining quality as fitness for purpose would not be so problematical. Unfortunately there is disagreement both between and within these groups. Each group has its own view on the role and purpose of the university and it changes over time. The government acting on behalf of its electorate says that the purpose of the university is professional training and useful research. Industry, which benefits from both, tends to agree. University councils might pay lip service to academic freedom but in a world of increasing competition and shrinking budgets, they see their purpose, more and more, as balancing the books, even making a profit.

One might imagine the lecturers, researchers and students who compose te university would have a common purpose. But this is not always so. For some the purpose of the university is to graduate innovative and independent thinkers, carry out pure research, challenge existing paradigms and create new ones. For the more pragmatic the purpose is to produce graduates acceptable to the various professional bodies that will register them, and carry out commissioned research. From the above discussion it is clear how complicated it is to decide on 'purpose'. It could be argued that deciding on the purpose of higher education and what fits it, can be just as interminable as what is excellent or good in university education.

Conclusion:-

Few universities or the teachers who work in them dare defy this system. In today's academic world the one who pays the piper calls the tune. And the tune today is economic accountability not academic freedom. Increasingly in higher education, decisions about quality assurance depend on a government minister and his/her departmental bureaucracy. Today quality is defined and monitored by those outside the university. Too often, despite the stated policies, it is quantity not quality that is measured. In the research area this means the number of refereed journal articles and the size of research grants. In teaching the number of graduating students and the grades they attain. This in turn steers the sort of assessments that are used in universities.

The danger of this is that those within the university will abrogate their responsibility for defining and assuring the quality of assessment. External reviews are here to stay. It is important that university staff be involved with them in a positive way. Quality audits can improve the quality of teacing, learning and assessment. Nevertheless, researchers, teachers and students – those who have most at stake, given the espoused purpose of the university – often feel disempowered by external quality assurance, especially if their purpose tends to be political rather than pedagogical. In this paper we have made a plea for giving experts in the field of higher education (teachers and students) a chance to agree on the main purpose of assessment. A chance to identify what makes particular assessment practices excellent or the best of their kind. Our hope is that pedagogical ideals such as the meaningfulness and transferability of learning will outweigh political ones. That researchers, teachers and students in universities will comply with intrinsic standards of excellence rather than with those imposed from outside.

Conclusion and Recommendations:-

It is quite clear that education in the 21st century presents challenges to quality assurance that were

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unimaginable just a quarter century ago. E-learning in particular, with its ability to render time and place irrelevant, requires that we abandon traditional indicators of "quality" such as "contact hours," "library holdings," and "physical attendance" among others in favor of more meaningful measures. For example, if the value of attendance has been high quality interaction among students and between students and instructors, then the indicator of quality today should be interaction, not attendance. Likewise, if the rationale for requiring certain credentials of instructors, e.g., an advanced degree, was to establish "expertise" in a subject, then in today's educational environment, the indicator of quality should be instructor expertise, not a specific academic credential. How do we achieve these outcomes-based measures?

First, we must agree upon a set of "universal" attributes or standards of a quality educational experience – not the means to achieving the standards, but the standards themselves. Moreover, these standards must be applied independently of educational delivery method. As we have discovered in the last few years, educational delivery is evolving faster than existing quality assurance methods. The resulting dissonance is the product of a misguided belief that standards of quality should exist for each type of delivery. Not only is this approach theoretically flawed, it is, as we have discovered, highly impractical. We must, therefore, focus on what outcomes we desire from educational experiences, not the means by which they are delivered. A point of departure for discussion of potential "universal attributes" of a quality education are in the table below.

Table 2:

Possible Universal Attributes of Quality Education

Quality Education Provides:

- Continuity between "advertising" and reality
- Continuity between purpose and practice
- Preparation for external credentialing/further study
- Personal/professional/academic growth for the learner
- Relevance
- Rich, multidirectional interaction
- Functional, "user-friendly" interface
- Adequate resources for: instructors, learners, curriculum
- Appropriate assessment methods/opportunities

Second, we must agree to evaluate educational programs and institutions in the context of the student experience, not the institutional experience. For Example, if we agree that "high quality content" is a universally desirable component of any educational experience, then quality assurance processes must focus on the extent to which content is learned not how it is taught. Moreover, it may be that "learning" should to some extent be determined by the learner, not the instructor or institution! Similarly, if we agree tat "adequate infrastructure" is necessary for quality education, then we must evaluate how that infrastructure serves students, i.e., not how many books are in a library building but how does the institution provide students access to such resources and to what extent are those resources relevant to the learning experience – again it may be that students play a role in determining quality in this domain.

Lastly, if we are to have viability and credibility in whatever quality assurance measures we adopt in the 21st century, we must open ourselves and the process to other stakeholders: the community, employers, professional organizations, peer institutions, and especially the students themselves. A great limitation of traditional accreditation paradigms, for example, has been that they tend to produce an "us versus them" dynamic as well as an inclination to provide just enough information to get by and to "hide" information that may negatively impact an evaluation. If the goal of quality assurance is actually to "get by" the

process, then the existing system still has value. If, however, the point of quality assurance is to truly evaluate quality and empower institutions to improve the delivery of educational experiences, then we must make fundamental changes in the quality assurance and accreditation paradigms we have relied on for the last 100 years.

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