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Quality Reviews in Higher Education in the United Kingdom

1 Background

Over the centuries there was relatively little external interference with how universities in the United Kingdom organised their activities or ensured the quality of their awards. There was an implicit trust in the peer review process, the understanding being that academics could be relied on to effect self-regulation and guarantee students a sound academic training. There was often only cursory treatment of the content of academic programmes whilst the system of 'external examining' secured the standard of academic awards. In the United Kingdom the huge growth in university student numbers within the last decade coincided with the increased move towards accountability that has provided academics (and administrators) in universities with additional administrative burdens. Nowadays 'big brother' is watching and making demands.

It is relevant to consider the background in the United Kingdom against which the need for accountability and quality assurance has developed. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the 'binary' divide between universities on the one hand and polytechnics and colleges on the other. This legislation had the immediate effect of practically doubling the number of universities in the United Kingdom. Immediately, new funding bodies for higher education were created for the four nations – England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland. The body with the largest responsibilities, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), set up its own organs for audit of universities' structures and processes and for quality assessment. By 1993 the previous considerable growth in undergraduate student numbers was subject to strict controls.

The former polytechnics which had gradually developed their own degree-awarding powers throughout the 1980's had been steeped in the rigorous validation and assessment procedures of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). This body became defunct with the loss of the binary divide. Besides, the 'new' universities had the stronger orientation towards professional education and multidisciplinary study whereas the 'old' universities did not have a history of heavy-handed assessment. Prior to the 1992 Act, the universities had an assessment of their research activities (the RAE or Research Assessment Exercise) in 1986 and 1989 and all universities (old and new) were eligible to compete for research funds in 1992. This assessment was repeated in 1996 and the funding bodies now use the ratings to distribute grants for research to Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

Whilst the 'old' universities had experience of their research being assessed, the quality of teaching (TQA or teaching quality assessment) had not been similarly exposed. Teaching quality assessment was instituted at a time when higher education in general was expanding whilst resources were shrinking. In this period two fundamental reviews were conducted – the so called 'Harris Review' (HARRIS 1996) of post-graduate activities (which inter alia informed research

and the Dearing Report of the NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION (1997), which informed teaching and took on board the recommendations for research in the 'report of Harris'.

A consequence of the National Committee's report was the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1998. Its brief embraces both research and teaching. It is appropriate at this point to provide and impression of how the separate assessments of research and teaching have impacted on University staff, prior to considering the projections for QAA.

2 Research Assessment Exercise

The 1992 Research Assessment Exercise had a huge impact on higher education institutions in England (McNAY 1997). Overall the exercise was perceived as improving research but there was some concern over its effects on teaching. The RAE was seen to have improved strategic development and management of research. There was a trend towards the creation of graduate or research schools related to the importance placed on the training of researchers. Dedicated offices (or administrators) were set up to promote University-wide research drives. The RAE also radically affected the management of human resources for research. Designating staff as 'research active' for the exercise was the equivalent of selecting the final squad of players for the football World Cup. Strategies to recruit and retain key research staff were linked to the 'transfer fees' commensurate with professional football. Those not designated as 'research active' could feel devalued and clearly the stress of working in a university environment was increased.

The preparation of documentation for submissions to the 1996 RAE consumed the working lives of many academics and administrators in the lead-in to the 1996 RAE. The closing date for submissions was 30th April 1996. Altogether there were 2,898 submissions from 192 participating HEI's: these named 55,893 researchers active within the institutions and covering 69 subject areas. These areas were assessed by some 560 members appointed to 60 panels (some panels covered more than a single subject area), many of the panel being assisted by „assessors" nominated by bodies with a major interest in funding research in their fields (medical research charities, research councils, and users of research). The results of the assessments were made public in mid-December 1996.

The ratings from the 1996 RAE were intended for use in allocating money for research in the HEI's by the funding bodies. This reflected their selective allocation of public funds by reference to judgements of research quality. Nevertheless they have had a much greater impact, being used to promote niche markers by a number of the universities and in the calculation of so-called „League Tables" for HEI's. The ratings have been used systematically by overseas governments in assigning sponsored international students to particular universi-

ties. This selective identification of institutions is likely to continue until the next RAE, predicted for 2001.

The RAE was hugely costly in terms of investment of human and other resources in the submission effort. Yet it was deemed to be enormously successful by the funding bodies. Reaction has indicated broad acceptance of the exercise, conducted on the basis of peer review of highly specified written submissions carried out by peers made up of only 1% of the total body of active researchers. The emphasis had been on quality, only 4 papers being cited for each nominated researcher. In addition details of research students (registered and graduated), other research staff (research assistants, research fellows), research funding for each year of the census period were provided. The most detailed submission was in the 6 pages of narrative articulating the research philosophy and the sub-areas of research in the subject concerned: alongside this was a detailed outline of the strategy for research in the years lying ahead.

The 1996 RAE represented an increase of 6% in the number of submissions compared to 1992. There was 11% more researchers submitted. Despite the criticism that researchers were focusing on short-term publications in order to be included by their institutions, the funding bodies deemed the RAE to be highly successful. It concentrated attention on strategic development, selectivity and performance. More researchers were involved, output had increased and these developments had not required any extra input of money from the funding bodies. Their dreams were being realised.

Teaching Quality Assessment

Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) was implemented on a national basis followed the 1992 Act which eliminated the so-called binary divide. Groups of assessors were trained by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) on a subject by subject basis. Subject areas were targeted in turn: those unfortunate enough to be identified for assessment in the early years were subjected to an enormous bureaucratic burden – the need to provide the comprehensive documentation to support the structures and processes by which they regulated their academic programmes. Those subject areas late in the queue for assessment have yet to be examined.

It was clear from the early years that the load imposed on teaching staff by the requirements of quality assessment could be sustained only with difficulty. Institutions to be visited were given more reasonable time to prepare for their assessments. Expert advisors were nurtured with a University-wide brief to help subject groups within their own institutions to prepare for the visits of 'assessors'. As a result the visitors were presented with a 'performance' by the home academic team that was not a true resemblance of the student experience. The local hosts knew that they were obliged to put on a good 'show' to impress the 'guests'.

The Quality Assessment Process

The quality assessment process follows the same broad pattern across the UK. The following stages are involved:

1. Subject areas are identified for assessment within a given period of time.

Anzeige

Neu in der dvs-Schriftenreihe:

Jürgen SCHWIER (Hrsg.):

Jugend – Sport – Kultur.

Zeichen und Codes jugendlicher Sportszenen.

Hamburg: Czwalina 1998. 160 Seiten.

(dvs Band 92). ISBN 3-88020-317-2. DM 36,00.*

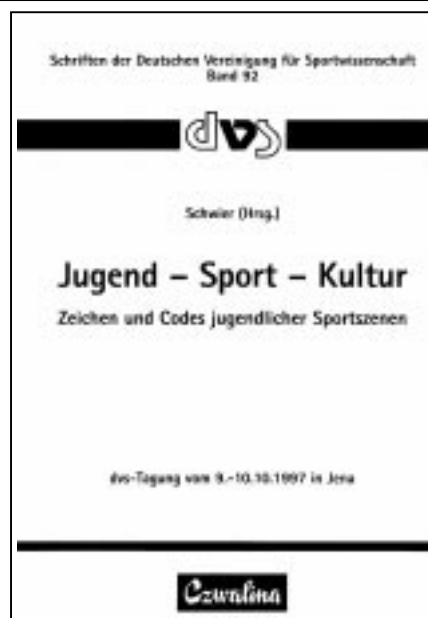
Das Aufwachsen in einer beschleunigten Jugendkultur beeinflusst ganz offensichtlich auch die Formen und die Dynamik des jugendlichen Sportengagements. So sind zahlreiche neuere sportbezogene Jugendszenen unter anderem dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die jeweiligen Bewegungspraktiken in der Sicht der Akteure kein bloßes Sporttreiben, sondern vitaler Ausdruck des gewählten alltagskulturellen Stils sind. Das Sich-Bewegen ist beispielsweise beim Streetball, beim Skating oder Snowboarding genuiner Bestandteil eines besonderen Lebensstils. Bewegungspraxis, Outfit, Musik, Körperbild und Verhaltenskodex sind vielfältig miteinander verwoben. Die in diesem Band dokumentierten Beiträge der dritten dvs-Tagung zu „Sport und Semiotik“ analysieren die in gewisser Hinsicht neuartige Vielfalt jugendkultureller Szenen im (Um-)Feld des Sports unter Berücksichtigung semiotischer Ansätze. Es wird versucht, die Zeichen und Codes jugendlicher Sportszenen nachzuzeichnen und die zuvor angedeutete symbolische Einheit zu rekonstruieren.

Mit Beiträgen von Jürgen SCHWIER, Eberhard HILDENBRANDT, Elk FRANKE, Anne SCHILDMACHER, Maud C. HIETZGE, Georg FRIEDRICH, Stephan TELSCHOW, Horst EHNI, Dirk BORCHERS/Bernhard WALSDORFF/Jürgen SCHIWER, Franz BOCKRATH und Christine LUDWIG/Matthias SCHIERZ

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2. HEI's are given notice, by their funding council of the subject areas to be assessed within the next cycle.
3. HEI's are asked to submit self-assessments, including statistical indicators, of the quality of education in the identified subject areas within a given time-scale.
4. Self-assessments are analysed by appointed assessors. In England, the self-assessments are judged and the assessment claim by the university concerned (of 'excellent', 'satisfactory', or 'unsatisfactory') either confirmed or not.
5. Assessment visits are planned on the basis of the self-assessments and the analysis of them.
6. Teams of assessors, including seconded academics and/or consultants/specialists in the subject area and full-time officers of the quality division of the funding councils, visit HEI's usually for 3 to 4 days. The visit consists of: meetings with those responsible for the quality of education – managers, academics, students, external contributors; examination of learning support facilities and structures, including learning resources and welfare support; direct observation of learning/teaching incorporating discussions before and after the teaching observed.
7. A report is written by the lead/reporting assessor in consultation with the other assessors, which concludes with the final judgement and contains: descriptive and analytical commentary on the quality of education provision according to the explicit criteria applied for reaching the judgement; a summary of (a) commendations; and (b) recommendations for improvements. The institutions have an opportunity, before the report is published by the funding council, to correct any factual inaccuracies it might contain.
8. All assessors of quality are trained, prior to practising, on courses arranged by the funding bodies.

The quality assessment method used between 1992 and 1995 was reviewed and re-developed to reflect the outcomes of wide consultation with institutions. Changes were implemented in time for the fourth round of assessments between April 1995 and summer 1996. The main changes were:

- a) universal rather than selective visiting;
- b) establishment of a core set of six aspects of provision to provide a common structure for the major features of assessment;
- c) grading of six aspects on a four-point scale (1-4 in ascending order of merit) to achieve a graded profile of the quality of provision;
- d) only one report (published) following an assessment visit;
- e) publication of the report on the subject provider's 500 word statement of aims and objectives.

Anzeige

W. BREHM / P. KUHN / K. LUTTER / W. WABEL (Red.)

Leistung im Sport – Fitness im Leben

Beiträge zum 13. Sportwissenschaftlichen Hochschultag der dvs vom 22.-24.9.1997 in Bayreuth.

dvs-Band 88. Hamburg: Edition Czwalina 1997. 248 Seiten. ISBN 3-88020-306-7. DM 44,00.*

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The Quality Assurance Agency

The Dearing Report in 1997 was probably the most comprehensive review of higher education in the UK over the last 50 years. One of its recommendations was the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a single body for quality assurance. Another was the establishment of the Institute for Teaching and Learning on a nationwide basis, whereby all new academics were trained formally in their first years of holding a University lecturer's post.

Set up in 1998 the QAA soon embarked on the agenda articulated in Dearing's report. Four principles underlined its approach to implementing its agenda:

- i) accountability – for publicly provided resources;
- ii) ownership – quality of provision to be designed into programmes from the start;
- iii) enhancement – draw lessons from innovative and good practice;
- iv) reduce burden of external scrutiny – streamline external quality assurance.

The early development work of QAA has four main strands:

- i) build proposals for a national qualifications framework, stretching from University certification to doctoral research programmes;
- ii) provide benchmarking information to enable subject threshold standards to be established;
- iii) enhance the role of external examiners;
- iv) develop codes of practice that should form the basis of future international reviews.

Clearly quality systems will be a continuing feature of academic life. Accountability confronts all the professions, not just education. The questions for the future are then more to do with *the nature* of those systems and their effectiveness, than to do with *whether or not* they should or will continue.

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