

4. Shifts, supplements, definitions and debates

This part looks at the extent of change envisaged by the proponents of the accountability for quality agenda in higher education, with a particular focus on the implications for universities. It examines the meaning of key terms and important distinctions that have implications for policy. It explores areas of ambiguity and contention with a view to deriving some operating principles for consideration in the following part. The main matters considered are: the respective roles of higher education institutions, governments and markets; the implications of different emphases on accreditation, assessment and quality assurance; the compatibility of accountability and improvement purposes and procedures; the assumptions underpinning national qualifications frameworks and competency-based learning and assessment; the issues of fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose; the intent, scope and feasibility of a standards-based approach; the extent to which 'consistency' rather than 'comparability' is desirable; and the 'transparency' agenda.

4.1. Shifts

The foregoing outlines of drivers and developments go some way to explaining the shift "from a trust-based to a regulatory approach" in respect of higher education quality (Harvey & Williams, 2010). However, there are overlapping motives on the part of various players, and these are potent not only in determining whether a more statist model will prevail but to what ends and how it should function. That outcome will depend in part on the tactical considerations discussed later in Part 5, and an appreciation of the substantive policy issues involved.

The accountability for quality agenda envisages, and to some extent is predicated upon, a number of shifts, conceptual and operational, including some substantive changes to the orientation, character and control of higher education. But just as the drivers discussed in Part 2 above are double-edged, and the developments outlined in Part 3 are ambiguous, so with the destinations; the points of arrival are forked.

One set of shifts is in the relations between governments and higher education institutions, including incursions by government into matters that have traditionally been the preserve of academic judgement. The action in this field may be seen to be contested between autonomous universities and "the evaluative state" (Neave, 1988; Neave, 1998; Dill, 1998; Dill, 2004). It expresses itself, for instance, in government assuming a central role in specifying qualifications and associated expectations of learning outcomes. In effect, the qualifications become "national property" rather than being owned by the educational institutions themselves (Tuck, 2007), but that transfer undermines the foundations that sustain them:

"The governance of qualifications continues to and needs to reside with their owner institutions and user communities. The alternative to these arrangements is to locate their ownership and management in a central agency. The consequences of this approach are likely to be the weakening of the 'communities of trust' (Young, 2008) upon which qualifications depend for their currency" (Keating, 2008).

A related expression of the imposition of the evaluative state is the insistence by governments that institutions provide evidence that learning goals have been met, through direct measures of student abilities. The assessment grades given by teachers, the graduation rates of students, the employment rates of graduates, and other indicators are no longer seen to be sufficient. To obtain hard evidence of student attainment, there is pressure for more systematic application to graduating cohorts of standardised tests, which previously institutions may have used primarily for diagnostic purposes, and mainly for commencing students, with a view to improving performance. The accountability requirements of governments may override institutional improvement efforts.

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Another set of shifts is from supply to demand drivers. In the VET sector, an 'industry-led' approach privileges enterprise requirements above both education and training provider purposes and interests, and the wider personal interests and development needs of individuals. In the Higher Education sector, a 'student-driven' approach prioritises individual interests above both provider and national development interests. But this is not a coherent set of shifts, within or between sectors (as noted above, in Australia the industry-led approach to VET is being diluted by greater attention to student needs), and its contradictions confound the building of relations across qualifications and learning pathways.

A related set of shifts is that from differences to similarities between vocational and academic qualifications. What were once seen to be distinct abilities (practical v theoretical), and more recently seen to be overlapping or blurred, in terms of provider types and knowledge-related and generic learning goals, are now seen by some to be convergent or even integrated. Differences in the kind of learning have been reduced in policy discourse to differences in the degree of complexity of learning. It is true that higher education graduates need to develop a broader set of generic skills in the contemporary context than traditional disciplinary studies may have enabled, not least given their employment destinations beyond the fields in which they studied. However, several professional fields (e.g. Engineering, Pharmacy) already have broader domain-related competencies embedded in the curriculum of their degree programs for professional accreditation. It is also true that VET graduates should have opportunities to develop broader personal capabilities and knowledge underpinnings than a functionalist approach to competency-based training often allows, even within the trades where graduates are more likely than others to stay within their fields of training, not least because they have a right to develop beyond the confines of their immediate work or social context. This is to recognise the liberating role of education.

However, it is not self-evident that learning in the cultural tradition of higher education and learning in the instrumental tradition of vocational education leads to commensurate achievements and to transferable capacities, nor that it should or can, whether for highly-skilled technical areas or higher levels of disciplinary specialisation. It is not that one set of achievements deserves to be perceived as vertically superior to another. Rather, the different achievements should be seen horizontally as equally deserving but intrinsically different in purpose, nature and outcome. Policy directions which fail to champion the significance of technical and vocational education, but subordinate it to higher education, demean the former and reduce the latter. The fusing of vocational and general education along a continuum of generic cognitive skills may well dilute specialisation of learning, not only for the para-professional occupations but also for the trades and technical and professional occupations for which the supply of talent is most important and least available.

Another set of shifts is that from higher education enmeshed in the nature of the learning experience to outcomes treated independently of the ways and means of achieving them. An expression of this shift is that from institution-based to outcomes-based qualifications; from qualifications that are primarily identified with the institutions that provide the programs to qualifications that are expressed as de-contextualised statements of learning outcomes (Young, Allais & Raffe, 2009).

The learning environment cannot be abstracted away as if it is irrelevant to the nature of learning, which is integrated as well as cumulative. It is an experience, the character of which varies place by place, issue by issue, over time, through error, feedback and reflection. What students learn from a set of structured learning opportunities is basically up to them but it can be infused with a sense of purpose or a desire to discover that permeates the institution or department where they learn; and they may learn significant things inadvertently or incidentally through the unstructured opportunities and the cultural norms that their learning environment provides.

The current focus on 'learning outcomes', conceived of as skills separated from domain knowledge, which can be tested generically, gives emphasis to pedagogy rather than to curriculum. Yet it is the design of curriculum that is fundamental to students being able to access the knowledge that is central to their chosen field of study. And unless there is a national curriculum, the comparison of results from standardised tests will reveal at best only the most superficial aspects of graduate capability. Perhaps some envisage a national curriculum to be just as necessary in undergraduate education as it is in primary and secondary schooling; but that is a debate no one has yet put squarely on the agenda. Such an intention would be difficult to justify. The state may have legitimacy in setting a national curriculum for compulsory education but what is its source of authority in respect of non-compulsory education?

These various shifts, taken together, can be threatening because they affect matters of fundamental importance to higher education and particularly to the university as a social institution of a unique kind. They involve 'homogenising' tendencies, which risk a loss of differentiation among institutions and programs, and 'fractionating' tendencies which risk a loss of the sense of the whole in respect of complex human capacities (Ewell, 2010). And when they are seen as externally-pushed moves, away from valued and professionalised ways of knowing, learning and working in the academy, they may provoke defiance.

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4.2 Supplements

Another way of viewing the change agenda is to regard the new accountability expectations as a supplement to academic professionalism—a new dimension of transparent reporting responsibility. Rather than regarding the changes in expectations, references, measures and reporting requirements only as a shift from the internal exercise of professional judgement, they can be seen as making the criteria for assessment more transparent to external communities and also for continuous improvement within higher education institutions. Thus it is not necessarily a shift away from the application of tacit knowledge in forming judgements but an opportunity to make the implicit explicit, as far as possible, to students, graduates, prospective students, employers and others who take an interest in the meaning grades awarded through the exercise of professional academic judgement.

A professional approach to improving student assessment for the institutional purpose of improving teaching effectiveness and learner success can lead to the availability of better information about learning and learning outcomes. Conversely, community and government requirements for improved transparency and more comparable reporting of attainment can act as a stimulus to improved assessment. In such a purposeful context, what has been long presented, especially in US debates, as a dichotomy between ‘accountability’ and ‘improvement’ may become reconcilable.

Enlargement of higher education participation increases the diversity of students and the demand for services in terms of curriculum orientation, study modes, places and times for learning, and trade-offs between convenience, quality and price. This more student-driven and competitive context calls for the supplementation of quality assurance mechanisms established in a supply-driven era, such as ‘fitness-for-purpose’ according to institutional mission, with more consumer-oriented information, such as comparability of different institutional offerings.

Additionally, in this more demand-driven environment for higher education, it may be seen that students and other interested parties no longer rely on the authority and claims of providers but seek out authenticity from other sources, including commercial guides, ratings and rankings, and the reported experiences of other students and graduates through social networking and other forms of communication. Thus traditionally self-referenced academic criteria, however necessary they may continue to be, are seen to be no longer sufficient to satisfy the information needs of prospective students and their families.

However, supplementation does not mean replacement; supplementation of quality assurance with stronger standards-based registration of providers and greater transparency in the availability of information for students and other interested parties, can stand alongside quality assurance of the fitness-for-purpose model which reflects the diversity of institutional mission. Neither do demand-driven approaches to higher education financing or consumer-oriented enhancements to the provision of information to guide student choice, supplant provider interests. Indeed demand can be seen to be shaped by the nature of supply to such an extent that the very notion of fitness for purpose, which is based on meeting customer requirements, turns on the position of suppliers in the market, what they offer and how they promote their advantages (Harvey & Green, 1993).

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For higher education, which is an ‘experience good’—something whose value cannot be ascertained until after it has been purchased (Nelson, 1970), or even a ‘credence good’—something whose worth is not known even after its consumption (Bonroy & Constantatos, 2008), and a ‘positional good’—something whose value depends largely on its ranked desirability (Hirsch, 1976), the important thing for students to know in advance (at least for those who make considered decisions) is what different opportunities are available to them and the relative advantages of the alternatives. Students do not know before they undertake a course what they are going to learn. It is important for prospective students to understand what distinguishes one learning option from another.

Accountability to clients in competitive markets for higher education services requires that public information to guide choice, on the one hand, and report on effectiveness, on the other hand, reveals what is different rather than what might appear to be the same:

“Programs and institutions should be held accountable for their particular purposes and on the basis of whom they serve. Those who view accountability from a system-level perspective should recognize explicitly how institutional goals differentially contribute to broader societal goals by virtue of the different individuals and objectives the institutions serve. Promulgating common measures or metrics, or at least comparing performance on common measures, does not generally serve this purpose”
(Borden 2010).

From these considerations, three imperatives for supplementation emerge. The first is to improve the provision of information to inform student choice, through provider institutions increasing their **transparency** by clarifying their objectives and offerings, as well as the criteria they use when making professional decisions. The second we might designate as the ‘threshold’ or Spellings concern about institutional **effectiveness**: how do we know that students are learning adequately? The third is ‘beyond the threshold’ or the UK House of Commons Select Committee concern about **comparability** of student attainment: how do we know whether there are real differences in the achievement of graduates from different institutions? In exploring the possibilities for operationalising these supplements, while being conscious of the risks associated with the shifts outlined above, and with a view to reconciling varying claims, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of key terms.