Paper 0034
David Mole, University of Hong Kong

The Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Hong Kong 1993 to 2013: What have we learned?

Domain: Higher Education Policy

Abstract

The paper reviews the failure of the quality assurance regime for Hong Kong's established universities to progress toward maturity in the period since 1993. Through a critical reading of audit manuals, reports and evaluations, against the background of Hong Kong's developing higher education system, the paper concludes that rapid change in local higher education has forced administrative and political imperatives onto the QA agenda, leading to a return to accountability-oriented audit. The paper also notes the transmission to Hong Kong of the international loss of confidence in quality assurance, with related calls for the deployment of benchmarks and standards of performance as key in an audit process. The paper argues that it may not be optimal to disguise accountability-oriented audits as enhancement–led peer reviews. A simple inspection of the books may have a lighter touch, with peer review a matter for institutions themselves.

Outline

In Hong Kong experience with contemporary forms of quality assurance began in 1993, when the University Grants Committee agreed to undertake a review of teaching and learning quality for publicly-funded universities (Massy and French 1997). In 2013, a fourth round of quality review has been launched.

It might be expected that a regime for the quality assurance of higher education would progress toward *maturity* understood as the gradual embedding of a concern with quality in institutional culture rather than compliance with requirements. Maturity should also entail increasing public confidence in the institutions under review and a move away from an inspectoral process dominated by demands for accountability toward review for enhancement undertaken by *critical friends*.

Despite the unusual homogeneity, high quality and relatively small scale of the

established universities, quality assurance in Hong Kong has not progressed smoothly towards such a mature system.

This paper seeks to understand this failure through a critical reading of audit manuals, reports and evaluations, against the background of Hong Kong's developing higher education system.

In 1993 the publicly funded university sector was in the midst of rapid expansion, with university intakes rising from less than 3% to 18% of the cohort. Partly in response to this, the funding agency – the University Grants Committee (UGC) – implemented the so-called Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR). This first round of quality review had a somewhat *ad hoc* character, with an over-broad review template, under-defined criteria for evaluation, and a review panel that would have benefited from more mutual discussion and training. However this was a broadly successful effort to promote and secure the creation across the sector of the standard features of institutional quality assurance processes (Brennan et al 1999).

The second round of TLQPR undertaken in 2001 was a conscious effort to take a step forward, including the articulation of criteria for evaluation of QA processes: a commitment to collective responsibility for quality, respect for evidence of achievement, the value of closing-the-loop and the conceptualization of educational quality in terms of learning outcomes (Massy 2001; Jeliazkova and Westerheijden 2002).

The positive impact of these two rounds of TLQPR can be measured by the production after the second round of a useful handbook of good practice: Education Quality Work: the Hong Kong Experience (UGC, 2005).

Having taken two steps forward in the decade from 1993 to 2003, the system took a step back in the third round of QA audit implemented from 2007 to 2011.

For this third round, UGC formed a Quality Assurance Council to oversee the process. The QAC determined that the audit should provide a new benchmark, with audits providing for the comprehensive inspection of institutional quality assurance processes – the first TLQPR revisited, but businesslike, thorough and inspectorial. Why did this reversal occur?

An important underlying reason was the second period of growth and structural

change in Hong Kong's tertiary education in the late nineties. Participation increased from about 30% to 60% of the cohort, chiefly through the development of self-funded, sub-degree programs. The increase in the range of institutions drew the Hong Kong government more directly into the business of higher education, leading to the development a Qualifications Framework and a related Qualifications Register and the multiplication of QA agencies that now include the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) and the Joint Quality Review Council (JQRC).

In this context, the administrative and political imperatives of the government and QA agencies have dominated. Although the relatively homogenous group of well established universities continues to operate much as before, demands for QA systems that are regulatory and fit for the whole tertiary sector have gained ground, while calls for enhancement-led review by critical friends have come to look inadequate and self-serving (UGC 2010).

Hong Kong's return to a focus on institutional processes also reflected a general, international loss of confidence in the quality-assurance project in the face of the enlargement and growing differentiation of institutions in the higher education space and public skepticism about the value of QA audit (Bernhard, 2011, and Westerheijden et al 2007). This development – sometimes articulated as a focus on benchmarks and standards – was transmitted directly to Hong Kong through the role of non-local consultants and members of QAC whose own experience has been of a range of institutions with different levels of risk of poor performance.

The fourth round of QA review is now in progress, with a review manual and schedule in place. While an effort has been made to soft-pedal accountability elements in the review and to recover an orientation to improvement, there is no deep commitment to a QA system designed for mature low-risk institutions.

The important lesson to be drawn from Hong Kong's experience with higher education quality assurance is that rapid change in higher education forces administrative and regulatory issues onto the agenda. Accountability-oriented audits will continue to be required by governments. Given this, universities need to consider whether it optimal to disguise these audits as enhancement–led peer reviews. A simple inspection of the books may have a lighter touch, with peer review to be maintained outside the remit of public agencies.

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