Universities and Quality - A World View

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Abstract

The quality of education provided by a university will be a function of organisational culture within. The traditional ideal for a university is governance by a collegial process based on a wide consultative style of management, which stimulates a supportive environment for academic creativity. This ensures academic freedom coupled with autonomy for university as an institution. The quest for autonomy has, from time to time, been thwarted by funding authorities who tended to see the university as poor managers of public funds.

The interaction between accountability and autonomy determines the culture within the universities. The balance between the two tends to show different patterns in different regions of the world. In the UK accountability tends to be dominant, with pressure on institutions to comply. This contrasts starkly with the USA, where autonomy is considered sacrosanct, with institutions adopting entrepreneurial ways of governance. In Europe, on the other hand, the pressure for accountability is reasonably balanced with the tradition of autonomy for the institutions. Whereas the universities in Australasia, even though are structurally moulded in the same pattern as in the UK, the requirements for accountability tend to vary between that of UK and USA. These broad environmental parameters bring about different organisational cultures, resulting in uniquely distinct characteristics of educational outcomes.

Keywords: Quality in education, Performance of higher education, Learning organisation.

Quality in Universities

The nineties (1990s) can be described as a ‘decade of heightened interest in quality… in higher education. There are more people involved in investigating, researching, auditing, applying, analysing, controlling, assessing, ……..and writing about the subject than ever before. This has inevitably lead to greater knowledge and a deeper understanding of policies and practice of quality in the sector’ (Roffe-1996). In spite of this, Piper (1996) sees that most of the reported activities in the area ‘represent work which busies itself with the minutiae rather than facing up to the fundamental issues of high quality in higher education…..gentle ambles in the foothills…(not) an attempt on the heights…it behoves us to raise our eyes…to the peaks above us…. (than) to busy ourselves with procedures and practices which take our minds away from larger issues.’

One way of explaining the dichotomy, may be to understand the origins of quality practices in higher education. The notions of quality originated from the business practices. Many of the concepts are borrowed directly from business e.g. continuous improvement, Total Quality Management etc. But the main difference is in the central focus. In business it is on the core organisational processes, which are, by and large, amenable to measurement and control, and
are predictable in behaviour. In contrast, in education, more so at the university level, the main core of the activity takes place deep within the intellects of the people involved. Intellect is the subtlest aspect of a personality, hence the processes present a considerable challenge to comprehend, let alone be amenable for measurement and/or control. ‘The more important the knowledge is, the less likelihood there is of ever noticing it’ (Bowden and Marton, 1998 – p16).

Therefore, to improve quality, one’s attention will have to shift from the specific processes to a global understanding of the transactions involved. Effort will have to be made to understand the broad parameters of the social and cultural context. As Piper (1996) says ‘Good practice depends upon educational policy. The proper domain for arguments about quality is educational philosophy’. The paper will make an attempt to understand the broad parameters determining quality in university education under different socio-political contexts.

Ideal Organisation

Ideally, autonomy and academic freedom have been the fundamental principles underlying the idea of a university. The autonomy refers to the relationship between the university and the society in the matters of governance and the academic freedom describes the scholar’s pursuit of learning free of externally imposed dictates (Cannon, 1994). In a traditional sense, an intellectual authority, thinly dispersed among the senior academic staff runs a university. The governance is by a collegial process promoting a wide consultative style of management. This creates a stimulating, but supportive environment where the academics have a considerable degree of autonomy and creative space to develop curricula and conduct research (Penington cit. Bessant, 1995).

Such a culture also sets up an ideal basis for nurturing the notions of quality in the organisation. On the contrary, any directive style of governance of academics would lead to reactive curricula that would only prepare the student for immediate employability rather than for leadership in the community, representing a classical ‘public-service attitude’ on the part of educators (Moses, 1995)

Reform Agenda

The claims of unlimited autonomy for the universities have traditionally been the common rhetoric of university funding bodies (mainly the governments). But it has invariably been more emotive than rigorous. Moberley (cit. Cannon, 1994) describes the legal battles between governments of Europe and America and the universities which were considered conservative in the past centuries. In the more recent past there have been a number of public reports in Australia (about 5 between ’57 and ‘82) criticising some aspects of the operation of universities for which the latter did not respond publicly (perhaps as a show of disapproval). This attitude is reported to have contributed, in a large measure, to the major reforms by DEET (Department of Education, Employment and Training in the Australian Federal Government) (through minister Dawkins) in 1988 (Cannon, 1994).

Over the past years, because of the perceived inefficiencies of universities, pressure is being applied on the universities to institute strong managerial modes of operation. Unfortunately, this has the effect of treating the academic staff more like employees of a corporate enterprise, rather than independent thinkers of future vision (Lynn Meek, 1995).
Autonomy and Accountability

The quest for autonomy by the academics and the moves for accountability by the authorities form the eternal dichotomy defining the organisational reality within educational institutions. While it is true that the freedom to govern and manage is at the heart of institutional autonomy, it is equally true that the discharge of duties and obligations relating to the use of public funds is the best means of securing that autonomy. Indeed, these obligations include regular and public demonstration that the affairs of the institution are being governed and managed properly.

Such dichotomous requirements of autonomy and accountability are not somehow unique to universities. It is a dilemma faced by almost any organisation, albeit in a less accentuated way than in universities, as the processes of the latter are more intangible, hence more inscrutable. Deming’s philosophy of quality management (Deming, 1986) is based on the premise that an organisation’s productivity and quality consistently rise with increasing empowerment of employees. But the reality of the work place also dictates that there has to be accountability, in order to economise the resource utilisation and also to give a direction to the organisation’s response to market conditions. Senge (1992) brings the seemingly dichotomous issues together and melds them into the model of a ‘learning organisation’, currently gaining considerable popularity among management practitioners. In such organisations, accountability and autonomy merge together indistinguishably at each workplace (figure 1). The organisational units become fully autonomous and accountable for their operations.

A Learning Organisation

A learning organisation represents the ultimate transformation of culture as the organisation progresses along the path of quality management by consistently empowering the employees. Typically, an organisation changes from a “Controlling organisation” to a learning one by mastering certain (five) disciplines. They are personal disciplines relating to how people think, what they want and how they relate to each other. Through learning, the organisation attains a capacity to create its future (ibid, ch1, pt1).

The relevance of the learning organisation model to the universities’ ideal of collegial culture was explored in detail in the earlier publications (ref. Srikanthan, 1996a, 1996b, Piper, 1996). “What university could refuse to embrace that as an ideal?” wonders Piper (ibid.).

A University of Learning

Bowden and Marton (1998) developed a model clarifying the core processes of a university, and enunciated a way of understanding the quality of its operation. They postulate that in all its commonly perceived functions: teaching, research or community involvement, the core process is one of learning (at different levels). Hence they argue that quality in university context has a lot to do with quality of learning. They describe the quality of learning as having a lot to do...
with qualities of different ways of seeing, that is multiplicity of perspectives (richness of vision) gained by the learner.

The authors examine the organisational characteristics conducive to quality of its processes and derive the attributes of a ‘university of learning’. The characteristics proposed coincide remarkably with those proposed by Senge (1992) in his learning organisation model, even though the authors (B & M) have based their work entirely on contemporary education literature. This should surprise no one, as Senge himself admits that his theories are no more than a collection of principles derived by many individuals looking at excellence in human endeavour in different walks of life.

Bowden-and-Marton’s model clearly allows us to understand the nature of core characteristics which should underpin a ‘university of learning’:

Let us take a group of academics involved in the teaching of a professional course as an example. Each academic should develop a ‘Personal Mastery’ to commit themselves to a deep exploration of the subject matter from a learner’s perspective. They should ‘think systemically’ to ‘discern the variation’ in (develop multiple perspectives to) the subject matter being taught. They should be synergistically involved in a ‘team learning’ activity studying the effectiveness of the total student experience. The team should develop a ‘collective consciousness which comprises of what is common and what is complimentary’ (B&M, p276). This develops a ‘shared vision’ within the team. The team operates by bringing the ‘differences and complimentarities into the open’(B&M, p201) which clarifies the ‘mental models’ held by individual members, derived from their professional and personal background. It ‘enriches their collective consciousness’ (ibid).

Again, the education model for the ‘university of learning’ has at its core a transparent element of autonomy, with a vibrant enthusiasm on the part of members to be fully accountable to their responsibilities.

**External Environment**

But the ability of a university to progress towards its organisational learning ideals is broadly conditioned by the community attitudes and the government regulations, which form the external environment. The latter dictates the level of autonomy and the nature of accountability required of the universities. Within the developed countries of the world, there are very distinct patterns that are observable. They seem to influence the trends in the rest of the world community attitudes towards the universities.

Issues of accountability and autonomy have expressed themselves in different patterns of dominant values depending upon the political and economic circumstances of the region. Some of the more characteristic features of this interaction as observed in United Kingdom, Northern and Western Europe, North America and Australia are discussed in the following sections of the paper.

**United Kingdom**
The developments in the UK have been the main source for the interest shown by the international academic community in quality assurance in higher education. The seeds of the developments in UK are contained in the inspection system, which applied to Polytechnics before 1992. In the unified higher education system formed after that date, more than half were former Polytechnics (Alderman, 1996). A general groundswell of interest in quality issues was being channeled into specific concerns with quality of higher education at the time of rapidly increasing student numbers. ‘The movement has been a response to two related fears. First, concerns about the impact of overcrowding on resources and space. Second, concerns about dilution of quality of intake.’ (Griffiths and Williams, 1995). The ultimate emphasis is on efficiency, i.e. more students for less cost.

The Quality Assessment Divisions (QAD) of the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC) carry out the assessment of all Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The QAD attempts to evaluate six different aspects of the teaching and learning function of the HEI, in an intense three-day visit. Subsequently, a report by QAD is discussed with the HEI and finally made public.

The procedure is claimed to have ‘changed the perspective of English universities .. with respect to the importance of reflective practice and organised development in the area of teaching and learning’ (Clarke, 1996). Unfortunately, there are more strident claims of its ineffectiveness. The procedure is claimed to be very bureaucratic, as it requires ‘mountains of papers to satisfy the assessors….Universities tend to become compliant, even devious’ (Elton, 1996). Alderman, (1996) considered that it no longer mattered ‘how well an academic teaches’, but the ‘paraphernalia of futile bureaucratisation required for assessors ’ was more important. Overall, the critics conclude that ‘such a single-minded checklist-approach to safeguarding quality is misguided and pernicious’ (Griffiths and Williams, 1995). As surmised by Rickett (Sir Raymond) (1992) ‘the disadvantages of a costly bureaucracy and the danger to academic freedom inherent in external assessment outweighed any advantages that might accrue from external validation.’

In the British model accountability plays a dominant role (a superior position as shown in figure 2). The institutional autonomy is conditioned by the constraints of accountability. The institutions look up to meeting the general audit requirements of the funding authority. The culture within the institutions will be directive, largely imposed by the requirements of the external authority. In general, it is very difficult for the development of an organisational learning culture, as the source requiring accountability lies external to the organisation.

The British model seems to be an extension of the school inspectorate system. It is interesting that the British took to it in spite of the traditional view of ‘universities as self-governing community of fellows’ (Vught, 1992). Another country with a strong reliance on external controls is France. The universities in France have had a tradition of external controls with struggle for autonomy dating back to as early as the 13th Century (ibid). The national evaluation committee, (CNE – Comite’ National d’Evaluation) carries out the external assessment of Higher Education on a more elaborate format than the UK system (Green and
Harvey, 1993). The author has taken the conservative position of naming the model ‘British’ as no more than sketchy details of the French system are available in English language literature.

**Northern and Western Europe**

In comparison, universities in most of the other European countries seem to be more independent. Many of the countries in the region show a remarkable similarity in their approach to assessment of higher education, in spite of their centuries of political antipathy, and their current levels of disparity in economic status. By and large, to these European countries, assessment of universities by external bodies is not an option, but a threat to direct the wavering universities into some action. Georgoussis and Michopoulos (1995) mention a provision in Greek Statutes, enacted in 1992, which would enable an external assessment of a university by a 9-member ministerial committee. But the provision has never been invoked. Amaral (1995) (Portuguese), records the general reluctance of a university to get involved in assessment, but warns against complacency, otherwise ‘one of the most painful evaluation systems’ as in UK will be imposed by the ministry!

The general European approach is typified by the view (ibid.) that ‘..it is vital.. (the) quality evaluation systems be run by the institution themselves… the universities must take the initiative..by starting their own evaluation process’. The Dutch have a sophisticated assessment system where the reward for the individual institution is more autonomy for organising own assessment (Van der Weiden, 1995). The national higher education assessment system is coordinated by the association of universities whose role is ‘meta-evaluative’: evaluating the evaluators. The individual universities appoint their own evaluation teams, comprising of external members, both national and international, who look at both research and teaching. The outcomes of the assessment are invariably critical, and usually tend to lead to a substantial review of activities. Saarinen (1995) describes the evolution of a similar system for Finland.

Three common elements which underpin the quality assurance in these countries in Europe are:
- The institutional self-appraisal,
- Performance indicators, and
- Peer review involving an outside institution (Green and Harvey, 1993).

The external experts should be acceptable to the faculty to be visited as unbiased specialists in the field (Vught, 1992). In an elaborate survey conducted within the Dutch universities, Westerheijden et al (1992) concluded that ‘the level of satisfaction about the implementation quality management system by the institutions is very high.’

Adopting an extreme position, much on the same lines, the German institutions promote the assumption that individual faculty members are responsible for the quality of their own work and the students are responsible for their own progress through the system (Banta T. quoted by Bray et al., 1992). This tradition of idealism perhaps springs from founder of the university of modern times, in Berlin in 1809, W.V. Humboldt. He described a university as being characterised by the independent status of staff (lehrfreiheit) and students’ free choice (lernfreiheit). (Bowden and Marton, 1998, p3). Such an idealism has not always carried the day, as indicated by the students strikes in several German universities in 1988-89 against ‘unbearable conditions’, and demanding improvements (Berendt, 1993).
The typical European approach seems to be one of the university pursuing its **accountability** to the community in its own **autonomous** way. Hence the two stay on par with respect to the execution of the assessment process, as shown in figure 3. Accountability is determined by the comparative status of the university among its peers. Such considerations for accountability will be driven from within the institution by the senior management.

Since the accountability criteria are, by and large, left to the institutions, probably these institutions represent a much better chance for organisational learning culture to develop within them, than the British model considered earlier.

**Northern America**

As distinct from the two broad approaches, market control is discernible in the North America (Essentially Canada and United States of America) where the funding money is placed in the hands of the students. The typical approach of an American institution is to acquire high levels of visibility through high-flying achievements to secure maximum student patronage, not too distinct from corporate entrepreneurship. Hattendorf (1996) mentions about the immense importance attached to popularity rankings by the institutions. ‘They are here to stay as long as the society is concerned with the 3 B’s: the biggest, the brightest and the best.’ Whereas, a number of institutions would tend to use quality as strategic marketing tool, there is no requirement from the funding authorities for a demonstration of compliance. The rationale seems to be one of letting market forces determine the organisational development within institutions. Hattendorf (ibid.) admits that ‘what these (ranking) statistics do not tell us and what they cannot tell us is how well the faculty teaches and how much their students learn.’


Banta (1993) regrets the ‘snail’s pace of change’ of quality improvement in US campuses, and their ‘inability to produce easy-to-summarise-and-understand measures of student learning and satisfaction.’ Anyhow Banta et.al., in 1996, see a clear trend towards funding authorities requiring instructional excellence being demonstrated.

Essential driving parameter of the university performance is the assertion of the autonomy of the institution which is directed towards the strategic objectives. Hence it occupies a superior position (see fig.4) in the model. Accountability is satisfied as an incidental requirement, thus occupying an inferior position in the model. In a model like this the organisation and its policies are driven entirely by the senior
management, representing a possible opportunity for the development of an organisational learning culture. But the unfortunate reality is that the inclination among the American institutions to develop a quality culture is overshadowed by the competition for students.

Australia

The Australian government introduced a quality dimension to the overall performance assessment by forming a Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) in 1993. All universities were to be reviewed and additional funds were to be provided to the ones with better quality in their operations. This was a world first, as Australia was the first country to reward quality through government funding. This was followed by a review of research activities in the universities in 1995. The two exercises in externally assessing institutions caused a considerable furor among the institutions (Srikanthan, 1996a). The current indications are that the government has all but given up the brief flirtation with external assessment.

Subsequently, there have been two further enquiries into higher education, by Hoare and West committees. The general thrust of the reports of the two committees has been on the lines of requirement of increased entrepreneurship by the university administrators. In general terms, it reflects the broad American ethos. Thus the Australian Government approach to assessing the performance of higher education has been flip-flopping between the British (pre 1995) and American (post 1995) approaches. It appears now, that the persistence with the American model will continue for some time into the future.

University and Learning

The paper made an investigation of the notions of accountability and autonomy in both the micro-organisational levels and the macro environment of a university. At both the levels they are capable of profoundly influencing the quality of performance outcome of the organisation:

- At the micro-level they contribute to the quality of operation of each unit which then have a potential to combine synergistically to manifest as organisational excellence (fig.1).
- At the macro-level, they may be hampered by excessive regulation as in British model (fig. 2), or by excessive chaos as in the North American model (fig.4).

The balanced macro-environment provided by the European model (fig.3) seems to provide the best opportunity for the universities to develop a high-performance culture as represented by the figure 1. Neal and Nedwek (1995) commend the European (Dutch, in particular) systems as providing ‘an appropriate balance between external demands and institutional autonomy, while building public credibility and improving internal processes.’

Thus, by developing a harmony, within the internal environment, and with the external environment, a university not only becomes a university of learning, but a learning university as well.
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End notes:

“ The corresponding terminology of the disciplines of a learning organisation as proposed by Senge(1992) are shown in italics