

Quality Assurance, Open and Distance Learning, and Australian Universities

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Article abstract

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This paper considers the relationship between notions of quality assurance and open and distance education, between quality assurance and higher education more broadly, and between quality assurance and the implementation of recent quality audits in Australian universities. The paper compares quality portfolios submitted to the Australian Universities Quality Agency by two universities, one involved in distance education, the other not involved. This comparison demonstrates that the relationship is variable, and suggests that reasons for this have more to do with business drivers than with educational rationales.

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Quality Assurance, Open and Distance Learning, and Australian Universities

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Abstract

Open and distance education has integrated quality assurance processes since its inception. Recently, the increased use of distance teaching systems, technologies, and pedagogies by universities without a distance education heritage has enabled them to provide flexible learning opportunities. They have done this in addition to, or instead of, face-to-face instruction, yet the practice of quality assurance processes as a fundamental component of distance education provision has not necessarily followed these changes.

This paper considers the relationship between notions of quality assurance and open and distance education, between quality assurance and higher education more broadly, and between quality assurance and the implementation of recent quality audits in Australian universities. The paper compares quality portfolios submitted to the Australian Universities Quality Agency by two universities, one involved in distance education, the other not involved. This comparison demonstrates that the relationship is variable, and suggests that reasons for this have more to do with business drivers than with educational rationales.

Keywords: distance education; quality assurance; online learning; e-learning; audit; higher education

Introduction

Following the expansion of enrollments in Australian universities in the 1980s, the federal government decided that the public purse could no longer fund universities at the same per student levels, and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) scheme was introduced in 1989 as an additional taxation on students and funding source for universities. This 'user pays' principle supported the government's efficiency aims and allowed it to use its battery of statistics to demonstrate per student costs and benefits, gradually reconstructing the student/ consumer (Baldwin and James, 2000). As students began again to experience paying for higher education through HECS, and were provided with more choices in an expanded market (see also Cummings, Phillips, Tilbrook and Lowe; Nunan; Inglis; Smith; and McConachie, Danaher, Luck and Jones, this issue), the issue of quality was more rigorously pursued, with the establishment of the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in 1991. This instigated external audits of universities in 1993-1995, with universities ranked according to particular criteria and rewarded financially as a result (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 1995). This process was clearly unpopular with those who 'lost' in this competition, and, from its

conclusion in 1995 to the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2001, there was a policy vacuum relating to quality, notwithstanding guidelines and frameworks regarding benchmarking (see also Inglis, this issue) and quality (Inglis, Ling and Joosten, 1999; McKinnon, Walker and Davis, 2000). Having given universities increased independence from government funding sources and regulation, and encouraging them to grow as commercial entities, the government had also expanded the role of quality assurance (see also Inglis; and McConachie, Danaher, Luck and Jones, this issue) in order to provide comfort to anyone who should seek to question whether Australian universities are providing 'quality.' AUQA allows the government to 'steer at a distance' (Knight, 1994; Marceau, 1993; Marginson, 1997) more effectively, borrowing from its experiences in other areas of government activity (Gashler, 1994) and the use of the technique internationally (Kickert, 1991) to apply it to the operations of Australian universities (Vidovich, 2002).

Notwithstanding the long history of distance education in Australia (Smith, 1984), one of the policy developments that occurred over this period was the establishment in 1988 of Distance Education Centers in seven universities to act as resources and service centers to the Australian higher education system. This was seen as a means by which isolated and 'second chance' students could access higher education. The federal funding of these centers was shortlived, ending in 1994 because of policy developments and changes in technology that reduced the need for universities to rely on a specialist center. The existence of these Distance Education Centers in Australian higher education provided an impetus for a reconceptualization of quality (Calder, 1994) by introducing notions of quality of commodities (through correspondence packages) and quality of service (through student service centers) and a focus on educational production and delivery as a 'Fordist' process (Evans and Nation, 1989). A further option for 'second chance' learners was the establishment of Open Learning Australia as a distance provider acting as a broker for existing institutions and providing courses to students without the usual high school prerequisites (King, 1992). It is fair to say, however, that distance education did not greatly influence mainstream policy debates during this period, particularly those related to quality assurance.

Australian Universities

There are currently 38 universities which receive federal funding for teaching in Australia, including the private Australian Catholic University and Notre Dame University. Bond University is another private university, but it does not receive funding for teaching. Each of these universities has its own particular character and role within the educational market (Marginson and Considine, 2000). It must be recognized that these universities, now cast as independent enterprises in an educational marketplace, are not equals:

The market in higher education is no level playing field. Institutions do not compete on the same terms. All else being equal, strong institutions with the greatest capacity to compete tend to become stronger over time relative to other institutions – unless government intervenes to even up the competition, for example by distributing funding on the basis of inter-institutional equity, or a planned division of labour (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p. 188-189).

Given this, one would expect that universities' representations of themselves, and of the quality of what they do, would be different depending on the particular role that they play in this market and the particular 'niches' that they wish to pursue. Since distance education technologies can enable engagements with new markets, their use can create new definitions of quality within universities.

This paper aims to tease out the changing relationships between distance education and quality assurance. It does so by comparing two Australian universities, with respect to their submissions to the AUQA audit process. It focuses upon their use of distance education methods and rationales in that process, and upon their particular locations in the Australian educational market. I have chosen the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and the University of Adelaide for this purpose, owing to the differences in their use of distance education technologies, as described below. I now give a brief sketch of each institution's market positioning as 'Enterprise Universities' (Marginson and Considine, 2000), followed by an analysis of the primary text that each produced as a part of the audit process that each underwent.

USQ (see also Smith, this issue) has a significant history of distance education and has won a number of awards for its distance education delivery, including an institutional award from the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE). Described by Marginson and Considine (2000) as one of the "flexible learning specialists" (p. 226), and as a "New University" (p. 190), USQ has significant distance delivery to students both in Australia and in transnational settings.

The University of Adelaide is one of the original state-based "sandstone" universities (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p. 190), with very little tradition of distance delivery. Having a history that dates back to its establishment as a cultural pillar of a British colony, it is a high prestige institution with elite disciplines such as medicine and law. Like all universities, it has expanded its use of online technologies within teaching and learning.

Despite the divergent histories of these two institutions, each employs online technologies for the purpose of delivery. I have chosen this aspect of delivery for particular emphasis in my analysis below, since it is an aspect of open and distance education in which they are involved (even though Adelaide is not significantly engaged in distance education per se), and because it is laid down as an object of interest in AUQA's audit manual (Woodhouse, 2001).

The Research Framework for the Study

In this study, I focused on the primary texts produced by each university for the AUQA audit process, namely the performance portfolio document that each institution submitted to AUQA, which I call "the submission." These texts were publicly available from the universities' websites. In order to analyze these texts to discern the dialogical relationships between distance education and quality assurance in the case of the two universities, I employed the theory and methods of critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2003; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Janks, 1997; Luke, 1995; van Dijk, 1993, 1997; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). This approach to the study of social policy has been applied to a wide range of situations, including those of political platforms (Fairclough, 2000), management texts (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002), and university discourse (Fairclough, 1993). In accordance with this research tradition, I take the language of these texts to be both "socially shaped and socially constitutive" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134), and I aim to read them in a socially critical way in order to link these "discursive practices, events and texts" to ". . . wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes . . ." (Fairclough, 1993, p. 135). This approach allows us:

. . . to connect each individual social event with the larger patterns of social relationships that persist from one event to the next. We need to be able to relate *discourse*, the words and deeds of the here-and-now, to the *Discourses*, the social habits of speech and action in the community as a whole (Lemke, 1995, p. 20, *emphasis in original*).

For this study, particular interest was paid to the discourses of distance education, as represented by online delivery, and of quality assurance, and these discourses were then related to the Discourses of society as a whole. For example, I aimed to track some of the links between the practices, events, and texts described within these discourses and wider social and cultural forces, such as those constructing Australian universities as entrepreneurial businesses in an educational marketplace. It is these particular social forces, crystallizing in what Marginson and Considine (2000) call the “Enterprise University,” which were of particular interest.

While there have been numerous policy developments in the area of quality assurance and online delivery (see for example: the international survey by Parker, 2004; the development work by the Sloan Consortium in the United States, such as Moore, 2002; and the European SEEQUEL project summarized by Johns, Baker, and Williams, 2004), these have focused on instrumental approaches, providing practical advice to practitioners, and thematic analyses of these approaches. My interest in this study, rather, was in the wider social forces at play in such policy developments as described above. In order to study the development of policy positions about quality in online delivery within the critical discourse framework, it is thus necessary to consider two discourse formations, which do not interrelate greatly at present, but which are likely to influence each other more so in the future.

The first arises from the discourses around online delivery in universities, which I will call the online discourse formation. This modernist discourse formation attempts to demonstrate the educational and institutional advantages of the Internet for the delivery of education. Online technologies have emerged as one of the key mechanisms by which universities have aimed both to modernize their internal operations, through the use of computer-based administrative systems, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their teaching, understood within the massification paradigm (Scott, 1995) as an effective way to reach more students more cost effectively. These are some of the ways that online technologies are being used to enable universities to gain a place at the education marketplace table, broadening their reach, increasing their visibility, and commercializing their operations. For distance educators, the advantages of online technologies are usually portrayed as adding increased interactivity, for example through the use of online discussion methods, to past delivery techniques (Inglis, Ling, and Joosten, 1999; King, 2001; Meyer, 2002; Rumble, 2001; Salmon, 2003; Taylor, 2001). For teachers of on-campus students, online technologies are promoted as providing increased flexibility and richness to students’ educational experiences, freeing them from attendance at particular places and times (Bottomley, 2000; Nunan, 2000).

The second discourse formation is that of quality in university education, which I will call the *quality discourse formation*. Quality assurance processes aim to provide guarantees, not necessarily of quality per se, but rather of the carrying out of the atomized processes by which particular ‘products’ are claimed to be produced. Thus it creates languages and activities that prescribe and proscribe, while all the time maintaining the supposed ‘independence’ of the organizational unit under its gaze: the university. Implicit in these policy positions is an idealized notion of what a university is, and consequently of what a good university is. Within this, ‘quality assurance’ is seen as a way to ensure that universities can demonstrate that they have appropriate measures in place to satisfy their ‘stakeholders’ that the education that they provide is of a satisfactory standard, or of a comparable standard to that of other universities (Harman, 2001; Kemp, 1999; Pond, 2002; Salter and Tapper, 2000; Twigg, 2001; Woodhouse, 1999). This is a discourse of control and accountability, where educational outcomes are seen as important commodities to be measured and promoted (Rhodes and Sporn, 2002; Vidovich, 2002).

I turn now to analyze two texts from within the quality discourse formation: the AUQA submissions from two Australian universities. These analyses consider the nature of the online

discourse formations within them, and from this juxtaposition identify the ways in which the language of these texts is both “socially shaped and socially constitutive” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134).

The USQ AUQA Submission

The submission by USQ to AUQA (University of Southern Queensland, 2002) is a 52 page full color document with numerous charts and diagrams. The report has an attractive cover similar to a promotional brochure, featuring a horizontal montage of images of students. The images are, from left to right, of two students using computers in a library, a student in academic dress holding a parchment, two images of students operating technical equipment, a group of students chatting casually outside the Wide Bay Campus, and a group in period dress who appear to be acting in a play. All of the students appear to be young and some have an Asian appearance. Males and females are about equally represented. It is a bright, inclusive, and international image.

USQ’s institutional commitment to online methods in its operations is emphasized throughout its submission. For example, one of the “Key Institutional Priorities” listed in the submission is the:

Completion of a totally integrated e-infrastructure, including outcomes from the GOOD and BETTER projects, object-oriented personally configured website(s), the three modules of the PeopleSoft system, USQAssist (including full roll-out of the RightNow CRM system), an upgraded USQConnect with new (WebCT) learning management platform and appropriate access portals . . . (p. 10).

This remarkable list of information technology projects creates an impression of innovation and technological competence. The USQ text places a large emphasis on online technologies in describing its future directions and its current quality claims. With a range of acronyms and ‘brands,’ an online environment is constructed that claims to provide a range of high tech solutions. What is not clear, however, is what problems these solutions address. Rather, they are cast as evidence of a progressive and innovative university. By invoking these information technology projects, the text projects USQ into the higher education landscape as a leader in the use of online technologies.

USQ’s submission also spends a great deal of its available space describing its teaching and learning environment. In particular, Section 4.3, “Flexible Modes of Delivery,” comprises 21 of its 52 pages. It makes strong claims for leadership in this area and places technology at the heart of its innovation by claiming that it is developing a new “generation” of distance education technologies (Taylor, 2001):

Many universities are just beginning to implement fourth generation distance education initiatives. USQ is actively engaged in creating the fifth generation based on the further development and judicious application of new technologies (University of Southern Queensland, 2002, p. 26).

It is interesting how the USQ text makes quality claims with respect to this online environment, considering the fact that the use of online technologies at the time was so new. It is difficult to claim established educational quality in an area where the means of teaching are so rapidly developing and changing, and when quality is often associated with experience developed over a long period of time. So instead of arguing for online quality, the submission argues for quality through the “. . . pivotal role of the Distance Education Centre as the focus for the instructional design expertise and research, production and distribution of distance learning materials . . .” (p.

8). This claim is justified through the acknowledgment of international distance education awards won by USQ, such as the ICDE award of excellence mentioned above, and noted on the university's homepage at the time of the audit. The role of the Distance Education Center and the materials that it produces are a key rhetorical tool in the USQ text's quality claims. Indeed, its surveys of user feedback from the early 1980s on the quality of the materials and services of the center are relied on in the portfolio, which as the AUQA panel noted ". . . pre-dates most online technological advances (about which USQ collates impressive usage statistics) . . ." (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2002, p. 14). So there is a disjunction between the rhetoric of online technologies being fundamental to the operation of USQ on the one hand, and their absence from the quality discourse on the other.

The University of Adelaide AUQA Submission

The University of Adelaide submission to AUQA (University of Adelaide, 2002) is a 90 page document with a color cover featuring the university's two logos. The cover of the submission thus represents the university in a professional genre, using the symbols of brand marketing. It is a sombre and mature image. The submission itself is a drawing together of information to present a case for quality across the university. One device by which this is achieved is by making a general claim, followed by examples which have desirable facets of a systematic process, but which are not coordinated. For example, in the area of learning support the submission makes a general claim about quality:

Academic areas provide a wide range of learning support. An extensive system of course advice, with its blend of pastoral care, information on administrative practices and assistance with program choice [,] is a notable strength of the University . . . (p. 37).

The report then supports this claim with examples from disparate areas of the institution:

Some schools have appointed their own discipline specific advisors (eg. Electrical and Electronic Engineering), whose role includes monitoring students at risk (eg., Chemistry). Others have taken this further by appointing a Student Learning Support Coordinator to advise on study skills and monitor assignment requirements (eg., AGSB) . . . (p. 37)

This section goes on and lists a total of seven areas which have examples of 'good practice,' listed as undifferentiated examples. It is as if discipline specific advisers all monitor students at risk, advise on study skills, monitor assignments, etc., yet this is clearly not the case. The way in which they are listed as examples allows a reading of them as facets of one process. There is an elision from one example to the next, without qualification, as if each was another instance of a homogeneous process, even though the actual activities being spoken of (and the people involved) are quite different. The attempt here is to imply that examples are exemplars of quality. In this way, the submission gathers evidence from the university's disparate operations into a document that attempts to present a coherence that may not necessarily exist within the institution. In a sandstone institution (Marginson and Considine, 2000) which is made up of strong faculty groupings, where the central management is not strong, this is a way to demonstrate that corporate processes for quality assurance exist. Such an institution's quality text must argue that quality in its many parts make up a quality whole, if it is to mount an argument regarding quality assurance processes at the institutional level.

The submission spends only 12 pages on teaching and learning – the same space given to “Governance and Leadership” – and acknowledges that the university needs to improve in teaching and learning:

The University has made a strategic commitment to raise learning and teaching to a level of excellence on a par with its research performance (p. 31).

The means by which learning and teaching performance could be equated with research performance (two quite different endeavors) are not described. Nor is the claim about research quality substantiated in this part of the document, although claims are made about this in an earlier section, and the reader is assumed to have been convinced by this. Consider the bases on which the claim for research quality is made:

The University of Adelaide is one of Australia’s leading research institutions. It has a long tradition of producing high quality research that is attuned to the economic and social needs of South Australia, Australia and the international community. It receives significant levels of government, industry and other external funding, reflecting its relevance and importance in the current research climate. In striving for quality research outcomes, the University of Adelaide has put significant resources into supporting its higher degree research (HDR) students (p. 21).

Concepts of ‘tradition,’ international standing, and resourcing are appealed to here, but these bases are not relevant to their teaching and learning improvements since, as already acknowledged, such things are not present for teaching and learning. There are some serious problems with the comparison between research and teaching and learning quality. Take, for example, the valuing of input resources in the above description of research excellence. In this argument for quality in research, the attention given to inputs, such as grant income and resourcing for support for research students, is presented as an indicator of quality. Yet this argument cannot be used in claiming quality in teaching and learning, since it is acknowledged that funding for teaching grants has been reduced because of financial constraints (p. 36).

In any case, the submission makes it clear that the university’s current strengths lie in research rather than in teaching and learning. The University of Adelaide submission uses achievements in one area of its operations, namely research, and reflects their glory onto another – teaching and learning. Yet the arguments used to justify claims for quality research do not hold up for teaching and learning. The submission glosses over this logical anomaly by a range of strategies, as summarized above.

Continuing the low key theme of teaching and learning in the submission is the section on “Educational technologies:”

The University has not been quick to embrace the opportunities afforded by new educational technologies, proceeding with caution and modest expectations. Its emphasis has been less on the opportunities they provide for distance education, and more on their potential for improving teaching efficiency for staff and learning flexibility for students (p. 36).

Here online technologies are associated with the language of reluctance and slowness, displaying “caution” and “modest expectations.” This is an unusual collocation. It is rare to see information technologies associated with slowness and caution, rather than ‘real time’ and rapid change. This

language of reticence and prudence is then associated with notions of “teaching efficiency.” The catchcries of online technologies, flexible delivery, and the like are circumscribed here with considerable mollifications. They are cast as a means of providing “learning flexibility for students,” but the journey toward that destination is a slow and careful one. In this way, teaching innovation with technology can be seen to be progressing in a managed and cautious way, making the changes fit easily within the quality assurance discourse of the audit submission, where changes must be planned, managed, measured, evaluated, and – eventually – audited. There is also a clear tension between “teaching efficiency for staff” and “learning flexibility” for students – this latter concept fitting more easily within the online discourse.

But the tensions do not end there. The submission goes on to indicate that online methods are in conflict with the university’s culture, when it points out one of the conclusions of the self-assessment focus groups that it held with staff prior to the audit:

Of particular concern is the mismatch between many of the University’s policies and procedures on the one hand, and the requirements of a centrally administered learning management system on the other. These will require urgent attention (p. 36).

Here “centrally administered” online delivery sits uncomfortably in an institution like the University of Adelaide with decentralized control. The use of distance education technologies is not a central plank of its strategy, but something which is developing slowly. Claims for online development are cast in the future tense, while management commitments are placed in the past tense. Online learning is not mentioned explicitly in the submission’s description of the institution’s quality assurance processes.

The Universities’ Locations in the Market

The University of Adelaide’s AUQA submission indicates that online delivery is not important in its market positioning. It is satisfied to rely on its reputation and its research performance as its main market advantage:

In a University with a formidable research culture, the emphasis given to learning and teaching over the last decade has been a significant achievement . . . The University maintains its market dominance in highscoring school-leavers, including those completing the International Baccalaureate. This continuous quality intake of students is achieved through multiple approaches: the marketing of the University’s reputation, effective undergraduate student recruitment strategies, student load planning processes and rigorous admissions policies. Minimum TER [Tertiary Entrance Rank] cut-off scores for bachelor programs maintain high entry standards while providing students with realistic expectations of success (University of Adelaide, 2002, p. 32).

Hence online technologies figure within the list of a range of activities carried out by the institution, without taking a central place within its market strategy. Online delivery is not relied upon. The quality assurance of teaching and learning is described with the language of caution and slowness. These markers of quality in the educational marketplace are ignored in favor of other ‘selling points.’ The university’s sandstone reputation and dominance of the high achieving school leaver market describe dominance in the market. By contrast with the University of Adelaide, the USQ text uses online technologies as a key rhetorical tool to market the university to the educational marketplace, but does not use them significantly for quality assurance

purposes. Rather, when the discourses of quality assurance are required, more safe and traditional data are presented from traditional distance education methods and processes.

Conclusion

This paper, in comparing the AUQA audit submissions of two Australian universities delivering distance education, has described links between their depiction of quality, through these delivery mechanisms, and their institutional locations in the educational marketplace. This initial analysis suggests that the logics used in their quality claims have more to do with business drivers (see also McConachie and Danaher; Cummings, Phillips, Tilbrook and Lowe; Nunan; and McConachie, Danaher, Luck and Jones, this issue) than with educational rationales. The function of quality audit, to assure the quality of a national ‘brand’ of Australian university education, is best served by traditional, bounded, and well known data. This came from the Fordist processes of traditional distance education in the case of the USQ submission text, and from descriptions of quality inputs in the case of the University of Adelaide text. On the other hand, the marketing function of quality audit was provided by the USQ text through the use of future-focused images of online delivery tools and technologies; while the University of Adelaide text appealed to traditional reputations.

For USQ, as a new university, based in the Queensland rural center of Toowoomba, and with a heritage as a College of Advanced Education, the online world presents it with an opportunity that it must grasp if it is to grow – the overriding imperative of the Enterprise University (Marginson and Considine, 2000). Less encumbered by slow and traditional academic cultures, new universities have an outward-looking stance that makes them “. . . precariously free to reinvent themselves . . .” (p. 202). The University of Adelaide, as a sandstone university with a traditional background, can assume that it possesses elite “positional goods” (Hirsch, 1976; Marginson and Considine, 2000). As such, it can incorporate the online world into its operations without substantially changing its assumed superiority. It can do what its fellow sandstones have done, namely to “. . . appropriate modernism, layering it into their academic traditions” (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p. 199). The particular location of each institution in the market may have a decisive influence on the use made of distance education methods in its respective arguments for quality educational provision.

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