

# Autonomy Versus Accountability: Measuring University Teaching Performance

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## Introduction

This paper is designed to identify issues relating to the role being assumed by governments and national authorities in holding universities accountable for the standard of their teaching. While the phenomenon is widespread among developed higher education systems, this paper focuses on recent experience in Australia and compares this with the position in England.

In both systems universities are nominally autonomous institutions. In Australia the collegial tradition was imported from Britain. External interference was exceptional (Marginson and Considine 2000). In the 1980s 'market mechanisms were not supposed to operate' in Australian universities (Coaldrake and Stedman 1998, 173). 'To a significant extent universities have been self-organising institutions. They have chosen for themselves a mixed history of medieval authority and modern science which has been invested in traditions of scholarly exchange and a shared intellectual responsibility for things past' (Marginson and Considine 2000, 1). However, driven by a 'mixture of financial imperatives and ideological leanings', conservative Australian governments in the mid 1990s imposed 'a pervasive market logic' on the organisation of Australian universities (Coaldrake and Stedman 1998, 173). It was expected that 'universities would obey signals sent by selective consumers and entrepreneurial organisations' (Marginson and Considine 2000, 36).

The market that was envisaged, however, was a 'quasi-market' (Marginson and Considine 2000, 36). In both the Australian and English systems universities are increasingly held accountable beyond the context of the market for their performance and for their use of state resources. The Australian Government – noting that, although teaching is a core activity of all universities, teaching performance has a lower profile than research performance – determined that a system of 'rewards and incentives for excellence in learning and teaching' would 'promote the overall quality of the sector, enabling

excellence in learning and teaching to be placed alongside delivery of research excellence in terms of contribution to Australia's knowledge systems' (Australian Government 2004, 5). The Australian Senate has declared that 'the advent of the "enterprise university" puts a much greater level of responsibility on [university] councils and administrations to ensure that taxpayers, students, and providers of private funds have some guarantee that quality higher education and research is being delivered' (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, 4.34). Why an enterprise university should have a greater level of responsibility than a fully publicly funded university is not specified. Nevertheless, this accountability, which has for some time applied to the distribution of research funds, is now also exercised through measures of teaching performance, which are used to determine eligibility for a component of government funding and the extent of that funding.

There is a potential tension between government regulation of standards and the simultaneous drive to convert public universities into entities that have greater funding autonomy. The Australian Senate Committee has termed this situation 'autonomy within a funding straitjacket' (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.4.101). The difficulty is compounded in an increasingly globalised environment in which flexibility of response to market conditions is critical to viability. As Giddens puts it, 'globalisation is not incidental to our lives today. It is a shift in our very life circumstances. It is the way we now live' (Giddens 1999, 19). While globalisation impinges on the sovereign law and administration of the states in which we live (Habermas 2001), states impose local conditions on universities whilst they are attempting to compete internationally. At the same time as there is increasing regulation of learning and teaching nationally, the 'work of academics now involves everything from physically teaching on campuses in foreign

countries, to collaborative research and development across national boundaries, to conducting “virtual” classes with students in a variety of locations’ (Fraser 2005, 7).

## Accountability measures

In Australia accountability for the quality of university teaching at the national level was first addressed as an aspect of a national university quality audit system. In 2005 three further initiatives were taken as a consequence of a national government review – *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*: (1) the establishment of a National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, which funds projects to enhance learning and teaching in Australian higher education institutions; (2) the extension of a system of Australian Awards for University Teaching designed to ‘heighten the status of teaching and support the centrality of teaching in institutional missions’; and (3) the establishment of a Learning and Teaching Performance Fund ‘to reward those institutions that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, 28). In the U.K. a further measure that has been considered is the accreditation and registration of teachers in higher education. The measures proposed and adopted are addressed below in five categories: broad quality assurance at a system level, which indirectly assures teaching standards; measures that assess teaching standards directly; incentives aimed at improving teaching standards; accreditation of teachers; and measures directed to broad public accountability.

### Quality assurance

An Australian Senate committee noted evidence that ‘the conceptual difficulties in defining what is meant by quality in higher education and assessing it have led to an emphasis on quality assurance mechanisms’ (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.5.95); that is the focus has been on the processes that institutions have put in place to assure quality rather than on the quality of the outcomes.

In England, at the time of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, quality audit was under the control of higher education institutions. Under the Act a ‘systems audit’ was introduced, conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). From 1996 the procedure was modified to draw on internal processes and evidence already available within institutions. From 2003 an Institutional Audit process was adopted. ‘Institutional Audit is a peer review process, focused on an institution’s central management and QA systems, which has the aim of ensuring that institutions are managing their own quality effectively, rather than of making direct observations on teaching and learning’ (JM Consulting 2005, p.v).

Australia adopted something akin to this systematic process. The Commonwealth had conducted discipline reviews during the mid 1980’s ‘to determine standards and to improve quality and efficiency in universities’ but there was no requirement on universities to act on these reviews (Department of Education Science and Training, 2000). From 1992 to 1995 a Commonwealth Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education undertook independent audits of institutional quality assurance policies and procedures and made recommendations about ‘the allocation of annual quality-related funds’ (Department of Education Science and Training 2000). Formal audits were discontinued until 2000 when the Australian Government in conjunction with state governments set up the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) as ‘an independent, not-for-profit national agency

established to monitor, audit and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education.’ AUQA is responsible for: conducting audits of Australian universities; publishing public reports of these audits; and reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the Australian higher education system.

### Assessment of teaching standards

In England a more direct approach to subject assessment was imposed as a condition of funding under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. In 1997, the Quality Assurance Agency was given responsibility for subject review with a view to making academic teachers more ‘professionally accountable’. Since then the system has been modified. Universal subject review was abandoned in 2001. Principles guiding the new system included a ‘lightness of touch’. Subject review still occurs in a modified form. Under the present system the Quality Assurance Agency review teams use four-to-six Discipline Audit Trails to check that institutional quality systems are working at subject level. The review includes looking at student work (JM Consulting 2005).

In Australia, under the Higher Education Funding Act 1988, universities must provide information to the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs about student numbers, staffing, financial data and academic performance of staff’ (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.4.36). This does not involve course review and concern has been expressed that ‘there is too much emphasis on institutional quality assurance and not enough on learning outcomes.’ (Department of Education Science and Training 2002). The establishment of AUQA ‘has raised the very difficult issue of measuring intellectual worth, and of measuring academic and intellectual achievement against the stated goals and learning objectives set by universities’ (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.5.101). In 2003 in a critique of Australia’s approaches to the quality of university teaching Guest and Duhs portrayed the AUQA procedures as inadequate and referred to ‘the complete absence of an incentive structure for improving teaching quality’; contrasting the rewards for high quality teaching to rewards for research (Guest and Duhs 2003, 53).

### Incentives for raising teaching standards

The approach adopted in Australia has been to introduce incentives for raising teaching standards through the allocation of a significant portion of government funding via a ‘Learning and Teaching Performance Fund’. This has involved a two stage process. The first stage determined eligibility to compete for the available funds. (The criteria are addressed under ‘Public Accountability’ below.) All providers who participated in Stage 1 of the Fund were assessed as eligible. In Stage 2 universities were ranked by performance against a number of criteria including: graduate evaluation of their course experience (employing a Course Experience Questionnaire); the percentage of students retained in programs and percentage completing; and the percentage of graduates going on to employment or further study. The plan is for only the higher ranking (probably top one third of universities) to be allocated a share of the available funding.

A further system of incentives is provided through the government administered Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The institute will provide over 200 awards for excellence in university teaching. Most of the funds for the awards go to individuals rather than to universities.

### Teacher accreditation

In England the Higher Education Academy provides a framework of national professional standards in higher education. The Academy maintains a register of accredited practitioners. It is said to be an important role of the Academy 'to develop and maintain standards of professional practice for its registered practitioners.' The Academy also 'accredits staff development programmes in teaching and learning in higher education offered by universities and colleges.' The Academy works with professional bodies 'to develop national professional standards in HE teaching' (Higher Education Academy 2005).

There is no similar system in Australia although the matter has been debated and most universities now conduct formal graduate programs in learning and teaching in higher education (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia 2004).

### Public accountability

In addition to the approaches to applying standards indicated above there are further pressures by government to heighten public accountability. In England, 'the revised audit process is not considered adequate on its own to satisfy the Government's, and other stakeholders', requirements for accountability and information on teaching quality.' It has therefore been supplemented by requirements on institutions to gather data on teaching quality and to publish information for students, employers and other interested parties. A National Student Survey is being conducted to enable all higher education institutions to publish a consistent set of information about quality and standards (JM Consulting 2005).

In Australia to be eligible to compete for funds under the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund universities were required to display on a website: a current learning and teaching strategic plan; student evaluations of subjects; evidence of systematic support for professional development of staff in learning and teaching; and evidence that staff probation and promotion practices take into account student evaluation of teaching and of subjects, and include effectiveness as a teacher as a criteria. As government funding as a percentage of university income has fallen dramatically in the past decade universities competing in the educational market place cannot afford to turn their backs on public funding. All universities complied with these requirements.

### Explicit drivers

In developing the Australian policy on quality audits in higher education the government provided the following rationale: 'The international reputation of Australia's higher education sector must be maintained to ensure our graduates have the world-class skills to compete in the global economy and to protect and grow our position in the education export market, which is currently worth \$5 billion a year. Given the expanded choice that will be available to prospective students as a result of initiatives in this package, it is imperative that information about the relative strengths of institutions be readily accessible. Employers should also have access to information about the capabilities of recent graduates' (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, 40).

The rationale provided for external review of quality assurance in England was similarly to: 'promote quality; provide public information; ensure minimum standards; protect the public; provide accountability for use of public funds; and protect and enhance the reputation of UK higher education. The last includes concern for "the employability of

UK graduates, and the standing of UK awards and professions both in the UK and internationally"' (JM Consulting 2005).

This can be represented as falling short of a central planning approach according to the Australian public servant in charge of Higher Education. 'The present approach relies more on benchmarked competition, neutral incentives and transparent information. These mechanisms promote the exercise of student choice and institutional diversification' (Gallagher 2000, 12).

### Teacher education and government measures

A further question considered here is whether the learning and teaching measures imposed by governments impact on the Teacher Education components of universities or whether these areas, whose professional expertise is in learning and teaching, already meet expectations. In Australian new national learning and teaching measures have not had much time to impact but experience to date does not indicate that Teacher Education will be in a privileged position compared to other fields of study. Using the measures of teaching performance employed by the national Teaching and Learning Performance Fund, teacher education as a field of study achieves average or poorer than average results. Initial teacher education produced a full time employment outcome of 79.6% in 2004 against an average for all fields 79.7% (Graduate Careers Council of Australia 2004). In direct measures of good teaching, undergraduate initial Teacher Education programs in Australia obtained an average of response to the 'Good Teaching' scale of the Course Experience Questionnaire of 43.2% for primary teaching and 41.7% for early childhood teaching against a national average of 45.2% for all fields of study (Graduate Careers Council of Australia, 2005). This does not necessarily mean that teaching in Teacher Education programs was poorer on average than the standard for all fields of study. It means that graduates in the field responding to the survey rated it as poorer. This could be due to graduates in Teacher Education having higher expectations of the standard of teaching than graduates in other fields. Nevertheless, given the measures used, on average Teacher Education departments need to improve their performance if they are to assist their home institutions to compete for Learning and Teaching Performance Funds.

### Outcomes at a national level

Few universities commented about the Australian Universities Quality Agency to the Australian Senate enquiry into higher education. Those that did gave 'guarded approval' (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.5.88). By 2002 many universities were supportive of the AUQA approach and processes (Commonwealth of Australia 2002). Indeed some university managers welcomed external requirements as providing catalysts for change and development. The Australian Technology Network of Universities argued that a benefit of the AUQA external audit system was the motivation it provides to an institution 'to document, critique and then enhance its internal capability for continuous quality assurance, improvement and innovation' (Scott and Hawke 2003).

This does not, however, guarantee an improvement in teaching standards when there is a strain on resources in the system. By 2003 revenue from government grants had fallen from 57 per cent of university funding in 1996 to 41 per cent. Australia had 'moved too far along the line of having our public universities dependent on private income' according to some

Vice Chancellors [university presidents]. As a consequence, between 1996 and 2003 the average number of students per teacher increased by one-third, from 15.6 to 20.8 (Green and Rood 2005). An Australian Senate committee 'was faced with irrefutable evidence of larger class sizes, overworked academic staff and abbreviated curricula. It is reasonable to assume that some diminution of standards must result' (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001 s.5.1). In fact, the committee 'found strong evidence to demonstrate that many subject disciplines in many universities had experienced declining standards in recent years (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s5.26).

## Conclusion and issues

As the Australian Senate Committee observed 'the degree to which universities may consider themselves autonomous depends upon their financial well-being' (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.4.101). Accountability measures have increased in the past decade. The Senate committee notes 'higher education policies have a strong flavour of centralized planning with ever increasing emphases on measurable outcomes and qualitative performance indicators.' (Senate Employment Workplace Relations Small Business and Education References Committee 2001, s.4.104). At the same time government funding as a percentage of university income has fallen dramatically.

That public accountability should increase as public funding decreases could be seen as a paradox. On the other hand it could be seen as the corollary of higher education being recognized as an enterprise making a key contribution to the domestic and export economy (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). The phenomenon of reduced government expenditure accompanied by government demands for accountability is not peculiar to higher education. It is in line with experience in other areas in which government direct involvement in provision of services has diminished. Australian states have privatised many public transport operations over the past decade. They continue to subsidise the services but make the subsidies conditional upon the maintenance of standards, including punctuality. The Australian government is moving away from public ownership of telecommunication services but is providing for detailed regulation of the sector. Perhaps democratic governments expect to still be held accountable by the electorate for the quality of these services, which were previously provided through the public sector.

In the case of England it has been claimed that 'While everyone accepts the value of an external check on standards and quality in higher education, there has been concern about the combined costs of all these external reviews on the sector, and the potentially negative consequences of diversion of academic effort into compliance activity' (JM Consulting 2005 p.iii). Subject reviews in particular proved very demanding on both institutional and system resources.

Critical issues on this topic then include:

- Technical matters such as the nature of the measures employed to influence the quality of university teaching, the susceptibility of learning and teaching performance to measurement/observation, and the possibility of making allowance for differing inputs to the educational process – such as socio-economic status of students;
- The political motivation to influence learning and teaching standards in universities, including the possibility that a focus on standards of learning and teaching is being used

as a distraction from a focus on resources available for learning and teaching;

- The nature of university responses – in particular whether responses merely involve conspicuous compliance or have a substantive impact on learning and teaching;
- Any effects on governance and decision making in universities; and
- The balance between the costs of implementation of measures and compliance with them against the potential benefits and the possibility of adverse effects.

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