

Chapter 2

The multiple functions of evaluation and quality assessment

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Introduction

Some form of quality assurance or assessment system is a part of the working environment for most people working in universities these days. Its rise is a function of higher education's massification, its diversification and its internationalization, and of the changes in its relationship with state and society [1,2]. Quality assessment is implicated in developments such as marketization and managerialism. And it receives both the blame and the praise attached to such developments. Quality assessment has its enthusiasts, who see benign intentions and real benefits to higher education, and it has its sceptics and antagonists, who see attacks on academic freedoms and much else. The purpose of the present chapter is to neither praise nor blame, but to take quality assessment and evaluation as more or less a fact of life and to consider how those of us who work in higher education can learn to live with it.

But what precisely are we talking about? 'Quality enthusiasts' among the readers of this chapter may already be getting critical of the loose way in which I am using terms such as quality assurance, quality assessment and evaluation. Definitions can be found, but much of the terminology on quality in higher education relates to local systems and their nomenclatures. For some, much is imported to higher education from industry and the quality gurus of management theory [3,4]. In this chapter, I want to take a rather pragmatic approach which implies the existence of both an external judgement of the quality of some aspect of higher education *and* a set of organizational procedures and outcomes that are associated with that judgement. The externality relates only to the boundaries of what is being assessed. Thus it might include an 'internal' institu-

tional assessment of the quality of a particular department or programme, i.e. externality in this case refers to the department/programme rather than the institution. On this conception, quality assessment (I shall tend to use this fairly generic term) does not necessarily imply the existence of a national, probably state-sponsored, quality agency, although, in practice, at least in most European countries, such a body probably does exist.

Learning to live with quality assessment in universities is about appreciating what it is really about and understanding its potential consequences for our working lives, our students and our institutions. Above all, I shall suggest that learning to live with quality assessment is about learning to use quality assessment, about avoiding undue defensiveness or obsessiveness about it, but seeing the mechanisms and procedures of quality assessment as tools which we can use to achieve things.

I shall also argue that quality assessment is as much about power and values as it is about quality. And it is about change. The practices of quality assessment both reflect and can alter relationships, both within HEIs (higher education institutions) and between these institutions and other parts of society.

Multiple actors

Who are the 'we' referred to above as the potential users of quality assessment? The multiple functions of my title cannot be divorced from the multiple actors who have a stake in quality assessment, who may attempt to use it for their own purposes and whose purposes may sometimes be in conflict with each other. The implementation of quality assessment in higher education can be seen as an example of what has been referred to as a process

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of 'regulatory intermediation', whereby the official purposes of a regulatory system become transformed into something rather different by the people who have a central stake in it. In a recent study, King et al. [5] have focused on the roles of, on the one hand, assessors or auditors who undertake the assessments of quality, and, on the other, the senior institutional managers who receive and process the assessments locally. I would like to extend the notion of mediation by pointing to a much larger list of actors, or potential 'mediators', i.e. students, teaching staff, course leaders and heads of department, educational administrators ('quality' and 'other'), institutional leaders, quality agency staff, quality agency consultants (assessors/auditors), staff of other national bodies, ministries etc., politicians, employers, civil society etc.

Nor will there be much homogeneity within these groups. There will be institutional and subject differences in perceptions, interests and responses. There will also be differences according to what is perceived to be at stake. A prestigious institution or department might perceive greater reputational risk and hence threat from quality assessment than a more middle-ranking institution or department. Yet an institution with even greater prestige might have the confidence (even arrogance) about its reputation to treat external quality processes with some disdain. More marginal institutions and departments, i.e. those with little reputation to lose, might perceive their very existence to be at risk from a negative quality judgement. At the same time, they may also perceive the prospect of significant reputational gain from a 'good' assessment. Either way, it is probably those institutions and units at either extreme of a reputational hierarchy that have the most at stake from certain kinds of quality assessment procedure; i.e. from those types that result in a numerical or other form of summative judgement. Thus responses to quality assessment cannot be 'read off' as reflecting a particular institutional position or stakeholder perspective. Interests and responses will be viewed differently in different places, reflecting local circumstances and perceptions. As part of an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) project some years ago, I described the very different responses of some 30 HEIs (higher

education institutions) from different parts of the world to the requirements of quality assessment [2].

It is worth noting, however, that the alternative to some formal quality assessment system tends to be evaluation by reputation. This can be a function of all sorts of things: history, size, location, as well as serious achievements in education and research. There is also, of course, a reciprocal influence between reputation and quality assessment, the former being dented or enhanced by the results of the latter, but the latter being influenced (sometimes unduly?) both consciously and unconsciously by the former.

In the above list of potential mediators, I have assumed the existence of something called a national 'quality agency'. The creation of such bodies in the vast majority of European countries is a central feature and driver of quality assessment practices within HEIs, but it is not co-terminus with them. For one thing, the agencies are frequently concerned only with the quality of *education*, leaving questions of research quality for others to determine. For another, they can draw attention away from the equally important *internal* processes of quality assessment. These have become a familiar part of the inner lives of many HEIs. Nevertheless, quality agencies have to be contended with. The EU (European Union)-supported ENQA (European Association for Assurance in Higher Education) and the more voluntaristic INQAAHE (International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) exert influence on the practices of individual national agencies and signal, to governments and others, the pervasiveness of their functions and activities in (nearly) all higher education systems.

Contexts

The way people use quality assessment processes reflects a number of things. The first is the *context* in which they are working. Here, I want to point to just two features of context: power and differentiation.

Power

The first concerns where power lies. The most common alternatives are the following: autonomous subject communities; a powerful and controlling state; self-governing HEIs; and market competition [6].

Countries differ in their traditions in these things (e.g. [7,8]). The Anglo-Saxon tradition has been one of self-governing institutions and latterly of market competition. Within this tradition, even relatively modest exertion of state power is perceived as a threat to academic health and autonomy, whereas in the Humboldtian and Napoleonic traditions of most continental European countries, the state has often been regarded as the protector of higher education's freedoms and well-being. And, of course, things are not always what they seem. In some countries, academics have often quite successfully colonized the ministries and other bodies that apparently control them, with ministers drawn from among the ranks of the senior professors and national advisory committees comprising academics playing important roles in the exercise of state power. It is the relative weakness of individual institutions rather than the weakness of the academy as such that has tended to be the characteristic of continental higher education in contrast with the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

We can also point to differences in the inner worlds of HEIs. The traditional autonomy of disciplinary 'basic units', in the terms of Becher and Kogan's [9] model, is challenged both by changes in the forms and organization of knowledge, with the growth of increasingly interdisciplinary programmes and research endeavours, and by the exercise of greater central or managerial power within institutions. But institutions differ considerably in the current balance of power within their organizational structures, to say nothing of the strength of the cultural resistances to the exercise of such power.

Power is not, of course, all in one place and it may be shifting, arguably most commonly these days away from subject communities and the state towards self-governing institutions and market competition. Quality assessment may be helping these shifts to occur.

Differentiation

The second point of context is the character of the higher education system, whether it is differentiated or standardized, unitary or binary, hierarchical or flat, large or small.

These are matters which are central to the functioning of quality assessment. The balance

between differentiation and standardization influences the extent to which quality assessment is about demonstrating and legitimizing *difference* (between institutions, programmes, qualifications, individual staff and students) or about guaranteeing *comparability* across a country's higher education system. The formalization of differences into distinct institutional sectors (typically binary distinctions between 'academic' and 'vocational' education) is an example of regulated differentiation, and usually results in separate quality systems for the different sectors. Difference can also be market driven, with emphasis on differentiated institutional missions within a formally unitary higher education system. Examples of regulated differentiation can be found in countries such as Austria, France, Germany and The Netherlands. The U.K. is probably the best example of market differentiation in Europe. A further element of differentiation is the extent of hierarchy in the distinctions that are made, generally between institutions, but also between departments within a subject area. Such distinctions, where they exist, are frequently historical and culturally embedded. Quality assessment linked to rankings and league tables can either reinforce or challenge traditional hierarchies. The general point to make is that the extent and form of system differentiation has important implications for the job to be done by quality assessment and for what is at stake for those on the receiving end of it.

A final feature of national context is that of size, in particular the number of separate institutions that comprise the higher education system. Within small systems, say under 20 separate institutions, the extent of informal knowledge and relationships makes some of the formal processes of quality assessment difficult to achieve. The small size of the national academic community can threaten the integrity of peer review and, in some senses, render it unnecessary. On the other hand, small systems may be characterized by greater trust, between both individuals and institutions, that can assist in achieving the improvement or enhancement goals of quality assessment. To achieve the more regulatory functions of quality assessment, small countries must often incorporate an element of international referencing, typically through the involvement of foreign experts in peer-review processes.

This is not to suggest that other contextual features are not also important, but it is suggested that the above are particularly significant when thinking about the functions of quality assessment. Thus is the purpose of the quality assessment system to ensure that quality is the same everywhere or to demonstrate that it is different? To what extent does it depend upon (or is it obstructed by) the local and informal knowledge and relationships which particularly characterize small systems and to what extent is it able to draw upon the wider expertise, greater neutrality and availability of comparison in large systems? (And a system, for these purposes, can be a nation or an institution or a subject community, for example.)

This discussion of contexts has assumed a national setting. But, increasingly, universities relate to a larger international academic community and marketplace. In some fields, international quality assessment processes already exist and are important sources of reputation and competitive strength. Various unofficial rankings and league tables of universities receive considerable attention. Internationalization does not remove the importance of quality assessment so much as add an additional tier to the evaluation processes involved. Thus national quality agencies within Europe are now expected by the European Commission to meet criteria set for them by ENQA.

Nevertheless, it is still generally local and national quality requirements that have the most direct impact on HEIs. According to the nature of the national and institutional contexts, I want to argue that quality assessment will reflect different distributions of power and values and that it may have different effects.

Approaches

As well as differences in context, I also want to consider differences in *approaches* to quality assessment. Here, I want to distinguish between (i) whether it is external or internal (to the object of the assessment); (ii) whether it is undertaken primarily by methods of peer review, performance indicators, procedural compliance or client feedback; (iii) whether it is *holistic* or *segmented* (i.e. looking at

teaching and research separately); and (iv) whether the level of assessment is a subject, an organizational unit, a course (and so on).

All of these things will influence what is likely to happen in practice and, in particular, who are likely to be the winners and losers from quality assessment.

A predominantly internal approach is more likely to be linked to action, to making changes in some area of an institution's work. Otherwise, why do it? However, increasingly, internal quality assessment has an external driver and reference point. In some contexts, it serves as a 'dress rehearsal' for the 'real thing' of external assessment. In other cases, while not directly linked to a particular external assessment event and judgement, internal assessment takes place as an act of compliance to the requirements of an external (national or institutional) authority. In the latter case, it may be the absence of an assessment that would result in consequences for the institution rather than the assessment itself. The 'compliant' assessment would probably be characterized by ritualistic and symbolic behaviour. The purpose of the assessment would be 'to do the assessment'. There is quite a lot of such behaviour about in higher education these days!

The method or methods of assessment also have consequences. Classic notions of peer review embody the authority and the values of academic, usually subject, communities. They can be important ways in which that authority and independence are exercised and maintained and they can provide 'protection' against the intrusion of values and interests from outside the academy. However, it is also increasingly common to find a more 'managed' form of peer review where reviewers work to criteria and procedures which are set and managed from outside the peer group. In such cases, the peers receive 'training' and 'support' by quality professionals and become something of the 'hired help' of the assessment agency rather than the ultimate source of authority. It is also questionable how far assessment at anything other than the subject level can genuinely be regarded as 'peer review' if such review is assumed to imply a shared knowledge base and values.

Performance indicators can be neutral and independent of expert peers and hence are often regarded as managerial tools. However, peer-review

processes, e.g. refereeing of publications or grant proposals, often lie beneath the metrics which produce the indicators. The interpretation and the credibility of performance indicators can also be dependent on their acceptance and endorsement by peer communities, which may be provided either cynically or enthusiastically.

Procedural compliance can occur as a feature of most forms of quality assessment, but it is probably most often found when the focus of the assessment is at the institutional level and where there is an external obligation to carry it out. It may also be linked to managerial forms of peer review, as discussed above. Thus codes of practice and guidelines are created and those undergoing the assessment must demonstrate that they are complying with them. The assessors will come and check or 'audit' whether practices conform to the codes and guidelines. While the notion of compliance carries with it rather negative connotations, it is of course perfectly defensible if the behaviours that compliance requires are desirable ones and beneficial in their outcomes.

Client feedback is frequently seen as part of increasingly consumerist and marketized trends in higher education [10]. Students are transformed into 'customers'. Research has 'users' whose needs should be met. At its simplest, client feedback is little more than the one-page questionnaire in the hotel bedroom. Typically these days in many HEIs, students spend a lot of their time repeatedly completing rather long questionnaires. And academics find themselves attempting to prove that their activities are meeting the needs of a client or client group beyond the walls of higher education. These processes may themselves be largely compliant, i.e. the important thing is to demonstrate that the feedback has been collected rather than to do anything as a result of it. But they can also be used to promote market behaviour, as when the results of 'student satisfaction' surveys are published on websites in order to inform the decision-making of future generations of students (clients) on what and where to study.

Another element of the approach taken to quality assessment is whether it is holistic or segmented. In the latter, separate functions of teaching and research will be assessed separately and there may also be separate assessments of administrative

and management processes. This undoubtedly has consequences for the effects of assessment processes and for how far they can reflect the 'real worlds' of HEIs and departments. Because, in these worlds, things do tend to hang together in practice. For good or ill, the research environment of an academic department has implications for its teaching. Both will be affected by the quality of administrative support and by infrastructure features such as libraries and computers. Where, as is most common, assessment of teaching and research is separated, not only are the integrated and holistic features of academic life lost, but there can be competition between the requirements of the different assessment systems. Those which have the largest consequences for funding and reputation will generally have the largest effects on behaviour within institutions.

The various methods and approaches to quality assessment are linked to differences in *levels of assessment*, whether it is institutional, subject, course, an organizational unit or functional area, or individual. Some levels are more readily amenable to performance indicators or peer review than others. Some levels are more amenable to setting criteria and measures of quality. Questions of level also raise questions of aggregation. To what extent can information about student satisfaction on individual courses be aggregated to form judgements about student satisfaction at subject or institutional level? How easily can the disparate research achievements of individual academic staff be aggregated into meaningful indicators of the research quality of a staff group, or even of a whole institution? How far can research quality criteria be common across subjects and research fields? These are questions of some difficulty for the designers and users of quality systems. They pose a central question of how much notice we should take of the results of quality assessment.

Values

Values do not, of course, stand outside of the contextual features to which I have already referred. They also reflect wider societal and cultural characteristics, which may be relatively stable or be undergoing radical change or even transformation.

Table 1 below looks at five types of 'value' underpinning different kinds of quality assessment system. They can be regarded as providing different answers to the question of 'what is quality'?

The 'academic' type is the most traditional and is still pervasive in most forms of research assessment. The 'managerial' type tends to be associated with greater institutional autonomy. The 'pedagogic' type is associated with the professionalization of academic teaching, which is evident by increased amounts of staff training and monitoring. 'Relevance' draws attentions to societal expectations and the greater public expenditure associated with 'mass' higher education. 'Consumerism' comes with a growth in competitive behaviour and a faith in markets.

There is no very tight relationship between the methods used and the different criteria of quality. Methods of peer review, student surveys and performance indicators are commonly used across all types. But the way they are used may differ by type. Peer review under 'managerialist' types will tend to give less autonomy to the 'peers' than under 'academic' types. In the latter, the peers may be promoting their own interests and values. In the former, they are meant to be promoting someone else's, e.g. government or institutional management. (In practice, of course, they may still be promoting their own interests!)

It is interesting to note that the five types in Table 1 provide something of a history of quality assessment in higher education in England, moving from the 'academic' values of the external examiner system and the peer-review system of the Council for National Academic Awards to the dual system of 'managerialism' (Higher Education Quality Council audits) and 'pedagogy' (Inspectorate and teaching quality assessments) introduced in the early 1990s, to the 'relevance' of graduate standards [the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)] towards the end of the decade, and finally to the 'consumerism' of the annual National Student Survey (the Higher Education Funding Council) introduced in 2005. It took around 15 years to move from the first to the fifth, and, of course, many of the features of the existing systems were incorporated into the later ones. The external examining system still exists, more or less permanently under threat of being appropriated

for other purposes. Thus, for example, extracts of external examiner reports are now published in order to help inform consumer choice.

I would not want to claim that there is anything inevitable or universal in this progression of types of quality assessment and their underlying values. They can coexist, albeit in some degree of tension. And they can be used by different groups inside and beyond higher education to achieve particular ends. Let me illustrate, first at the national level and then at the institutional level.

National, institutional and individual perspectives

National purposes of quality assessment frequently refer to accountability for the use of public funds. There is certainly a belief within government and its agencies in England, for example, that higher education's share of the public finances definitely requires the existence of evidence from evaluation and quality assessment that expenditure on higher education is put to good use. In more recent years, with neo-liberal ideologies emphasizing markets and consumer choice, it has become important that national quality assessment can support and justify difference and hierarchy. So we have league tables and rankings to demonstrate difference and, of course, the evolution of quality assessment procedures to furnish evidence for the rankings. The benign justification for this is that it helps bring more funding into higher education. The critical view would be that the processes of quality assessment serve to distort and to damage the very things which they seek to assess.

In some other national contexts, however, the job that quality assessment appears to do is to indicate membership of an international club. Thus the countries of Central and Eastern Europe rapidly developed higher education quality systems and agencies as part of a much wider process of creating the public institutions thought to constitute the infrastructure of modern Western democracies. There, the important thing sometimes appeared to be the existence of these institutions rather than anything they actually did. This arrangement was rather compatible with the interests of academics

Table 1. Values and quality assessment

Criterion	Focus	Common method (example)
Academic	Subject: knowledge and curricula	Peer review
Managerial	Organizational: policies and procedures	Audit
Pedagogic	Professional roles: skills and competencies	Student feedback
Relevance	Graduates: standards and learning outcomes	Performance indicators
Consumerist	'Customers': experiences and satisfactions	'Information' from student surveys

whose top priority was generally to be 'left alone'. We might also observe that, in this part of the world, links between academics and politicians tended to be rather strong, and the state could be viewed less as a threat and more as a protector.

Other national objectives concerning quality assessment can be the production of more employable graduates, greater social equity, greater international competitiveness and so on. The nature of the objectives will affect the approaches to assessment and the potential threats and benefits to individual academics and institutions.

If we look at quality assessment from the institutional and individual perspectives, being 'left alone' is frequently viewed as the preferred state of affairs. But reality often suggests otherwise. Quality assessment can sometimes be a source of scarce reputational capital, for both individuals and institutions. Where quality assessment offers reputational prizes, few individuals or institutions are unwilling to compete for them. But the approach and the values of the particular quality assessment system are important in determining who is most 'at risk' or has most to gain (i.e. the rules of the game and the likely winners and losers). Where prizes are financial as well as reputational, the enthusiasm for the competition increases accordingly!

A peer-review approach which emphasizes research and curriculum content carries with it the most reputational prizes and risks for academics. The exercise of control over the assessment process, or at least an intimate knowledge of the 'rules of the game', is something to be valued in these circumstances. It may be a way that those who already possess considerable reputational capital, and hence have more to lose, can best hang on to it. By setting the criteria for quality and participating in the peer-review processes of its assessment, academics can best ensure that existing reputational hierarchies are reproduced.

Conversely, the interests of those who come out relatively badly from existing criteria and the values they embody have more to gain from changing those criteria and the overall approach to quality assessment. Criteria of employment relevance or customer satisfaction may result in different winners, but, unless the new criteria and methods are in tune with the values of the stakeholder groups, their potential for providing reputational gain may be limited.

Therefore for all parties some level of engagement with quality assessment may seem the wisest course of action. 'Join your local quality committee' may be strategically sensible advice, for both individual and institutional interests.

Different approaches to quality assessment empower (and threaten) different groups within institutions. Subject communities have the greatest control over peer-review subject-based assessments. Managers and administrators may feel their positions strengthened by quality arrangements that emphasize compliance with institutional codes of practice and procedures. Academics may regard such procedures as a nuisance, but are hardly threatened by them. Students may feel that neither have much of value to offer them and governments may prefer the hard evidence of performance indicators.

It follows from all this that changes to quality assessment arrangements may subtly alter the balance of power, both within institutions, and between them and the organs of the state. And in so doing, they offer some mechanism of steerage over the changes taking place in higher education.

Assessment and the improvement of quality

At the outset of this chapter, we noted that benign claims are often made for the effects of quality assessment. Thus students may learn more and better things. Researchers may produce more and

better-quality outputs. The absence of clear-cut evidence for these claims should not stop us from taking them seriously. There are a number of reasons to suppose that real benefits can accrue from assessment of quality.

First, there is the motivational argument. This assumes that without some form of monitoring and accountability, some academics will do little research and/or care little about their teaching. This is not just about threatening the lazy, but more of rewarding and recognizing the excellent. The threats and rewards inherent in quality assessment provide motivation for all, individually and collectively, to 'do better'. The downside to the motivational argument, however, is that quality assessment systems often reward the wrong things (the quantifiable and the procedural) and have the effect of distorting academic work away from its intrinsic qualities. Moreover, the time spent on quality assessment procedures themselves is time no longer available for teaching and research. It has also been argued that the absence of trust that the motivational argument implies is itself damaging to relationships and behaviour within higher education [11]. Nevertheless, the motivational effects of quality assessment using methods of performance indicators, student surveys and the like provide one of the arguments for using these particular methods.

Secondly, there is the information argument. Quality assessment can both identify and disseminate 'good practice'. By seeing what is working elsewhere, academics in their peer-review role can take new ideas 'back home' as well as to other institutions as part of the review process. Several national quality agencies also make explicit attempts to publicize good practice through the publication of reports, organization of conferences, etc. This is perhaps one of the stronger arguments in favour of peer-review processes, especially at subject level, and it is less clear how audit, performance indicators and surveys identify and spread information of 'what works' and, by extension, what does not.

Thirdly, there is the argument that quality assessment can lead to improved relationships and more and better collaboration between academic staff. In particular, processes of self-assessment can bring a more collaborative approach to course design and teaching than would otherwise be found.

In research, a better knowledge of the interests and experiences of colleagues may stimulate collaboration and team working. It is argued that people can achieve more by working together than alone. Again, the counter-argument is that such potential benefits are too often undermined by the rules of the particular 'assessment game'. That even where people do, in fact, collaborate in order to 'get a good assessment result', this does not necessarily lead to improvements in either teaching or research. And, indeed, rather than improving relationships within the university, it can be argued that many forms of quality assessment work to undermine the trust that is essential to productive collaboration.

Fourthly, there is the argument that, by simply disturbing the status quo, quality assessment can lead to change and innovation. There is some evidence in support of this, especially from the relatively early years of quality assessment when the processes of self-assessment did appear to lead to change and innovation in many places [12], but the difficulty becomes how to maintain innovation if and when assessment becomes routinized and indeed professionalized. The sheer volume of assessment activity in some systems works against the achievement of its potential for innovation.

Fifthly, there is the argument that the 'threat' of external quality assessment can be utilized by managers within an institution to drive through changes that would not otherwise have been possible. This is really a variant of the anti-status-quo argument. The disturbance of existing ways of doing things, or at least the questioning of them, can be an opportunity for institutional leaders and managers to pursue their own agendas for change. In other words, quality assessment can be aligned with managerialism as a way of disturbing the conservatism and defensiveness of the academic profession. However, the extent to which such change agendas are genuinely 'improvements' to the quality of anything is likely to be a matter of judgement and values.

In their major review of the factors that affect what and how much students learn from their higher education, Ernie Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini [13] accorded rather low importance to the effects of quality mechanisms. This is not to say that quality assessment has not done much good in disturbing

existing and rather tired practices, through praising the good and admonishing the bad and in simply broadcasting the news that ‘things can be different’. But it does suggest that precise measures of these changes still remain hard to come by. Nevertheless, the tools of quality assessment should rightly remain in the armoury of those committed to change and improvement in higher education.

Conclusion

We all tend to look at quality assessment systems firstly in terms of how they might affect ‘me’, whether it is an individual or an institutional ‘me’. We then decide what mixture of engagement, compliance or rebellion is appropriate to the particular case. But we might also look at these systems and processes and consider why they have come about, who is steering them, what agenda they have, whether it is one we could share (or at least use to our advantage) and set our response accordingly. In fact, I think that this is probably going on all the time, either explicitly or implicitly. Quality assessment is worthy of our attention because it is an important part of the way in which higher education is being shaped and changed. It is interesting, and in our interests, to engage with these processes.

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